

LA SANTA MUERTE:  
ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE OF A MEXICAN FOLK SAINT

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint represented by a skeletal figure, often holding a globe, scythe, and scale. Santa Muerte has become ubiquitous in Mexico and increasingly common among Mexican immigrants in the United States. Santa Muerte is not accepted or authorized by the Catholic Church, but devotees, predominantly Catholic, petition Santa Muerte for protection in difficult situations and for assistance in securing love, economic success, and health. They appeal to Santa Muerte for assistance with lost causes, or Santa Muerte has been associated, especially by the media, with drug cartels, drug trafficking, and other organized crime in Mexico, but also with individuals on the margins of society, such as those threatened by violence, illness, or those who are disenfranchised by church and society because they are gay or transgendered. This study examines the Prehispanic, European, Mexican, and African origins for Santa Muerte imagery and practice. It uses case study methodology to examine Santa Muerte *capillas* (chapels) in areas removed from pervasive drug violence, including capillas in Oaxaca City and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Oral history interviews indicate that, at least in some cases, Santa Muerte is associated *curanderismo*, or healing, a function far removed from the violence of *narcocultura*.

## INTRODUCTION

<i>Especial dedicacion a mi santa muerte por protegerme y proteger a toda mi gente por ser justa entre las cosas por dejarme seguir vivo por darme la fuerza para castigar al enemigo por la bendicion a mi fiero pulso sertero y por poner a mi lado una jauria de fieles perros. —“Santa Muerte,” Cartel de Santa</i>	A special dedication to my Santa Muerte For protecting me and all my people For being fair in all things For allowing me to continue living For giving me the strength to punish the enemy For guiding my fierce, true hand And for placing at my side a pack of faithful dogs. —“Santa Muerte,” Cartel de Santa <sup>1</sup>
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Artifacts from the earliest days of human existence reveal concerns about obtaining food, securing protection from enemies and the elements, ensuring sexual success and procreation, and alleviating injury and illness. Only a few aspects of life were certain and predictable: night and day, the cycle of the year and its implications for food and hardship, and, ultimately, death. Humans sought ways to manipulate their environments in order to ensure success in the hunt, to guarantee the continuation of daily and annual cycles, and to comprehend and make sense of the mysteries of death and destruction. While some of these means of control were practical and involved hunting, foraging, finding shelter, and, ultimately, agriculture and architecture, those relating to the least understood aspects of life and death were spiritual. Humans were incapable of controlling certain aspects of life and found it essential to believe in a supernatural force that could be nourished through sacrifice and ritual. Theologian and historian of religion Karen Armstrong believes that humans have always been “spiritual animals”:

Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognizably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art. This

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1. Lyrics to the 2004 song “Santa Muerte” by the Mexican hip-hop group Cartel de Santa. All translations in this study are by the author except as noted.

was not simply because they wanted to propitiate powerful forces; these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of the human experience of this beautiful yet terrifying world. Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering the flesh is heir to. (*History of God* xix)

At the same time, death is the most certain and the most unsettling natural phenomenon and human rite of passage. As early as the Palaeolithic period, Neanderthals buried their dead with weapons, tools, and sacrificial animals, suggesting belief in an afterlife (Armstrong, *Short History of Myth* 1). In the twenty-first century, humans have technological control over some—but by no means all—of their existence. Despite humankind’s attempts to prolong life, youth, and health for ourselves and our loved ones, death remains inevitable and, sometimes, unpredictable regardless of one’s station in life. While some individuals invest faith in science and technology, many others turn to spiritual means in order to come to terms with those elements of life that cannot be controlled or understood—not only with their own deaths, but with threats of political, environmental, and economic chaos and collapse.

Folk saints are among those supernatural entities to whom individuals turn for spiritual—and sometimes material—solace. As defined by Frank Graziano, folk saints are “deceased people, some of entirely constructed identity, who are widely regarded as miraculous and receive the devotion of a substantial cult, but who are not canonized or officially recognized by the Catholic Church” (vii). In the song lyrics reproduced and translated at the beginning of this chapter, the Mexican hip-hop group Cartel de Santa acknowledges the power of one of these increasingly popular Mexican folk saints, Santa

Muerte, to provide assistance with the many challenges that have concerned humans for millennia: love, protection, strength against enemies, and the need to control death, as expressed in the desire “to continue living.” Santa Muerte, whose name reflects one of the few certainties in life, is usually depicted as a female<sup>2</sup> skeletal figure similar to the Grim Reaper, dressed in a white, red, or black hooded cloak or elaborate gown, usually holding a globe, the scythe used to sever the threads of human lives (see Fig. 1), and occasionally an hourglass or scales. She is sometimes accompanied by nocturnal animals, especially owls. Santa Muerte is also called “Santísima Muerte,” “La Niña Blanca,” “La Flaca,” and “La Flor Blanca,” among other designations, and images of Santa Muerte vary in size from small amulets (see Fig. 2) to a 75-foot construction in Santa María Cuauhtémoc, México (O. Avila).



Fig. 1. Plastic statue of Santa Muerte purchased at La Providencia market, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Collection of the author. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington.

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2. For this reason, unless addressing masculine images specifically, I use the feminine pronouns “she” and “her” in referring to Santa Muerte throughout this study, although the entity’s gender is sometimes ambiguous.



Fig. 2. Santa Muerte amulet with enamel and gemstones. Private Collection. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

Santa Muerte's image also appears on candles, lotions, *impresas*,<sup>3</sup> and packets of botanicals sold in the *puestos*<sup>4</sup> that offer spiritual, magical, and occult items at markets



Fig. 3. Packet of "Plantas Aromaticas," Catemaco market, Catemaco, Veracruz. Photograph © Christine Whittington

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3. Printed prayer cards.

4. Market stalls.

and *botánicas*<sup>5</sup> throughout Mexico and, increasingly, in the United States, especially involving the geographically dispersed Mestizo culture that José Limón refers to as “Greater Mexico.” Devotees incorporate Santa Muerte statues and images into shrines and *capillas*<sup>6</sup> maintained by predominantly female *capellanas*.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Santa Muerte has been the subject of graffiti, blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube videos, and postings on the web-based “Red Santa Muerte.” Her image appears on t-shirts, on jewelry, and is the name of a Nike® high-top sneaker.<sup>8</sup> A Santa Muerte amulet appeared in the 2004 U.S. film *Man on Fire* (Scott) and, at this writing, Santa Muerte is a plot device used in the American cable television series about a likeable serial killer, *Dexter*.

Despite Santa Muerte’s current popularity, she emerged as a popular folk saint in the early 1960s in the Mexico City barrio of Tepito<sup>9</sup> and her veneration has reached ubiquitous levels only within the last decade. Folklorist John Thomson published the first academic article specifically on Santa Muerte, “Santísima Muerte: On the Origin and Development of a Mexican Occult Image,” in *Journal of the Southwest* in 1998, exploring possible origins for Santa Muerte’s iconography, the texts of *oraciones*<sup>10</sup> to her,

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5. A shop specializing in herbs, potions, and other occult and spiritual items.

6. Chapels.

7. Chaplains; the owners and caretakers of the chapel, sometimes called *majordomos*, or stewards.

8. This sneaker can be seen on the Nike Air website:  
<<http://www.myairshoes.com/nike/santa-muerte-dunk-high-customs.html>>.

9. Although no definitive date has been established for the onset of Santa Muerte’s popularity, Oscar Lewis describes in *Children of Sánchez* a novena offered to her by a woman who wants to regain her husband’s love (290-291).

10. Prayers in the form of printed devotions.

and her appeal to those who venerate her. Thompson relates his first encounter with Santa Muerte's image, on an illustrated, printed "*Oración de la Sta. Muerte*" for sale at a stand marketing religious souvenirs in Magdalena, Sonora, across the border from Arizona (407). While Thompson's article focused on the origins and role of Santa Muerte among her adherents and also traced the influence of medieval Spanish magic and sorcery on Santa Muerte veneration, articles of another type began to appear in newspapers, magazines, and on websites in Mexico and in the United States in 2003. Many of these articles, especially those appearing in U.S. newspapers, expressed alarm at Santa Muerte's skeletal image, her association with death, and, even more, the presence of *narcotraficantes*<sup>11</sup> and other criminals among her devotees.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis explores the meaning of Santa Muerte for her devotees from a holistic perspective, including both historical sources and contemporary practices and practitioners. It is informed by research in a variety of disciplines, but especially by the use of the recorded interview as a methodology in the development of the folklore case study, a technique I studied with the late folklorist Edward D. "Sandy" Ives at the University of Maine, Orono. I must also acknowledge the role of my years as a government documents librarian and the legal and congressional research courses I taught at Penn State. They nourished a keen appreciation for the American constitution and the sacredness of First Amendment rights.

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11 . Drug traffickers.

12. The author's use of "devotees" follows that of Frank Graziano: "an inclusive, generic term to denote adepts of folk-saint devotions" (viii).

In Chapter I, I examine the individual elements of Santa Muerte iconography and veneration and their possible origins, including Precolumbian, European, Latin American, and Afro-Caribbean sources. Additionally, this chapter explores the popularity of other Mexican folk saints throughout history, especially their political significance, in order to uncover similarities in function between Santa Muerte and these other popular figures, both sanctioned and unsanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church.

Judith Katia Perdigón Castañeda notes that Santa Muerte's devotees, unlike scholars, are often not as interested in origins or mixtures of cultural elements as they are in efficacy ("Santa Muerte" 72). Chapter II addresses contemporary Santa Muerte practice, including its interaction with government and religious authorities, the demographics of practitioners, the nature of *capillas*, altars, and images, and its intersection with commerce. As noted by the news media, individuals exposed to *narcocultura*<sup>13</sup> in Mexico have come to be associated with several folk saints, not sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, who can be petitioned for requests deemed inappropriate for the Virgen de Guadalupe or St. Jude, the church-sanctioned patron saint of lost causes. As James S. Griffith proposes, "If God and saints are uninterested in a given need or project, perhaps there might be Someone Else who could help" (19).

Life in Mexico today presents many chaotic and threatening elements and it is often difficult to obtain unbiased information about incidents involving crime and violence. Reporting on drug trafficking and corruption in Mexico is dangerous and threats of retaliation inhibit journalists from publishing descriptions of a society destabilized by fear and lack of trust in civic and religious authorities. At least thirty

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13. Cultural aspects of narcotics trafficking. For a discussion of *narcocultura*, see Guillermprieto's *New Yorker* article, "Days of the Dead."

Mexican journalists have been assassinated since 2006, when President Felipe Calderón began a crackdown on drug cartels (Hernandez). Because Santa Muerte veneration sometimes involves individuals who are victims or perpetrators of criminal activity, this study relies on the reports of British and U.S. news correspondents in Mexico as well as blogs and other sources these writers respect, such as the anonymous Mexican student's *Blog del Narco* (Hernandez; Tuckman). Chapter II also examines the language used in a variety of government and popular media reports about Santa Muerte, including the use of the word "cult."

The existence of a uniquely Mexican concept of death as it relates to Santa Muerte is the focus of Chapter III, which presents a survey of thought on the subject by artists as well as scholars. This chapter addresses the complex issues surrounding Day of the Dead skeletal imagery which, if regarded in a superficial manner, might explain the appeal of both Santa Muerte and the more playful skeletons prevalent during Day of the Dead observances in Mexico and, increasingly, in the United States.

Finally, in Chapter IV, this study explores the Precolumbian, European, and African traditions of *magia*<sup>14</sup> and *curanderismo*<sup>15</sup> practices in Mexico as they relate to Santa Muerte veneration, function, images, and offerings. In 2008, I investigated these aspects of Santa Muerte practice by visiting and photographing two *capillas* and one home altar in the state of Oaxaca in areas not under constant threat from *narcotraficantes* and other violent crime. In this chapter, I analyze the *capilla* and experiences of a contemporary Santa Muerte *capellana*, La Doctora, who is also a medical practitioner

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14. Magic.

15. Healing.

trained in the United States. Adherents such as la Doctora, who practice their *culto* outside the urban Mexican criminal and *narco* culture, provide another lens through which to examine the phenomenon of Santa Muerte.

In Chapter V, I will bring these interrelated aspects of Santa Muerte practice together to demonstrate that this tradition is as complex and nuanced as are all religious traditions.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SOURCES OF SANTA MUERTE'S IMAGE AND VENERATION

Many of the elements of Santa Muerte's image and veneration existed in indigenous, European, and Afro-Caribbean folk culture long before the rapid proliferation of Santa Muerte practice, and the accompanying publicity about it, during the last decade. Scholars have not pinpointed definitive influences for Santa Muerte and even devotees cite conflicting sources, possibly depending upon their geographic locations and their own concepts and experiences of the folk saint. In exploring potential visual sources, John Thompson finds "no shortage of skeletal imagery to turn to, both in indigenous and colonial culture, both in colonial and modern times" (420). Like most other writers, however, he considers an exact source or progression of sources elusive.

Most scholars agree that the iconography of Santa Muerte's various manifestations, the act of petitioning Santa Muerte for favors and protection, the practice of providing *ofrenda*,<sup>16</sup> and the *oraciones* addressed to her can be traced to Precolumbian deities and their veneration, European—particularly Iberian—medieval and renaissance practice, and Afro-Caribbean influence through slaves brought to Mexico. Other folk saints elsewhere in Mexico and Central American, both authorized and prohibited by the Catholic church, have also been identified as contributing to Santa Muerte iconography and practice.

Although Santa Muerte is strongly tied to Mexican culture, Mexico is a large and diverse country, and the sources of devotional practice vary according to region, demographics, economic status, and the pervasiveness of crime and violence. For

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16. *Ofrenda* in this context refers to both the offerings and the altar on which they are presented.

example, when Santa Muerte is identified with crime or *narcotraficantes*, both adherents and observers sometimes cite the Aztec gods of death and the underworld, while those who associate Santa Muerte with *curanderismo* may identify sources more in line with love magic and healing. Those familiar with the Afro-Caribbean belief more prevalent in coastal cities have identified similarities with Cuban Santería, which also, of course, derive in part from Mediterranean, specifically Iberian, Catholicism.

### **The Gods of the Underworld: Precolumbian Sources of Skeletal and Death Imagery**

Death and skeletal imagery were part of the visual vocabulary of Precolumbian mythology. Evidence of the importance and role of death during this period includes archaeological data, such as the position and treatment of human remains and the presence of grave goods. Artifacts include painting, sculpture, and plastic arts in which death was often represented as a skeletal figure or a skull that is half bone and half flesh (see Fig. 4) (Perdigón Castañeda, “Santa Muerte” 20).



Fig. 4. Human skull with turquoise mosaic embellishment from archaeological site of Monte Alban. Museo del Ex-Convento de Santo Domingo, Oaxaca City, c. 800-1200 C.E. Photograph © Stephen Whittington. Used with permission.

The Precolumbian gods of the underworld are often offered as possible sources for both Santa Muerte imagery and practice. When they are cited in the popular news media (Rivera), these references seem to be intended to lend legitimacy, authority, and in some cases, the violent connotations of ancient belief to Santa Muerte practice. The deities most often cited are Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, respectively the Aztec god and goddess of death and Mictlán, the lowest level of the underworld and location of the bones of the dead. In addition to his skeletal appearance of bleached bones with spots of blood (Miller and Taube 113), Mictlantecuhtli's association with owls and owl feathers is sometimes cited as a source for Santa Muerte imagery (see Fig. 5). Like Santa



Fig. 5. Image of Mictlantecuhtli, with owl feather headdress, from the Borgia Codex. Photograph by Katepanomegas. Permission granted under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mictlantecuhtli.svg>>



Fig. 6. Mictlantecuhtli, Templo Mayor, México City. Placed in the public domain by the photographer and used with permission. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:MictlantecuhtliTemploMayor\\_B.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:MictlantecuhtliTemploMayor_B.jpg)>



Fig. 7. Mictlantecuhtli as part of *Arbol de la Muerte*, México City, Días de los Muertos, 2010. Photograph © Alejandro Linares Garcia. Permission granted through Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ArbolMurteMictSide1.JPG>>

Muerte, the image of Mictlantecuhtli has entered popular culture with depictions emphasizing his bloodiness. In Fig. 7, the Lord of the Underworld resembling a statue from the Templo Mayor in Mexico City (see Fig. 6) is depicted as part of the *Arbol de Muerte*<sup>17</sup> in a *Dia de los Muertos* celebration. The Russian illustrator Bopchara (see Fig. 8) emphasizes Mictlantecuhtli's death-associated attributes, including a necklace of skulls, an owl feather headdress, a skeletal face, bloodstained hands, and the companionship of the creatures of the night in the form of a red-eyed owl, bat, and spider.

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<sup>17</sup> Tree of Death.

This illustration corresponds to the fearsome countenance and glowing red eyes of some Santa Muerte figures on t-shirts and posters, and other commercial items (see Fig. 9).



Fig. 8. Contemporary depiction of Mictlantecuhtli by Vladimir Krisetskiy, a Russian illustrator who contributes to Pandora's Sandbox, a "concept art and illustration collective blog." Painting © Vladimir Krisetskiy. Used with permission. <<http://pandorasandbox.com/category/members/bopchara#>>



Fig. 9. Santa Muerte tile, Catemaco market, Catemaco, Veracruz, Mexico. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington.

In addition to imagery, the frequently bloody rituals surrounding Precolumbian sacrifice provide a grim history for Santa Muerte's skeletal image, corresponding to equally gruesome images of *narcotraficante* violence posted daily on the anonymous *Blog del Narco* and elsewhere. The setting for the novella "La Santa Muerte," by journalist and novelist Homero Aridjis, is the birthday party of a powerful drug cartel figure at his lavish estate. In the midst of an elite group of celebrity guests who include the journalist narrator, actors, a bullfighter, beauty pageant contestants, a bishop, and government and drug enforcement officials, Homero Aridjis recreates a gruesome human sacrifice of several of the cartel *jefe*'s enemies to Santa Muerte who, like the Precolumbian gods, demands a human sacrifice executed with an obsidian blade ("La Santa Muerte" 128-29). In an additional reference to Precolumbian ritual, the cartel *jefe* describes plans to use the obsidian blade to skin his enemies alive as sacrifices to the Aztec god Xipe Totec, the "Flayed God," whose sacrificial victims were flayed during his annual festival ("La Santa Muerte" 120-21; Miller and Taube, 188). In his story, Aridjis, who is intimately acquainted with and writes about Santa Muerte practice ("Santa Muerte [or the Saint of Death]"),<sup>18</sup> suggests a desire on the part of violent, elite *narcocultraficantes* to evoke bloody Precolumbian rituals as a means of connecting themselves to the Aztec gods, who had to be nourished with blood, as well as inducing terror among enemies or those who had betrayed them. While Aridjis's novella is a work of fiction, it may reflect his experiences as a journalist. Ricardo Pacheco Colin of *La Crónica de Hoy* reported the discovery of a Santa Muerte *capilla* at the mansion of Gulf Cartel *jefe* Gilberto García and an altar in the home of kidnapper and assassin Daniel

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18. In addition to his own writing on Santa Muerte, Aridjis's daughter, Eva Aridjis, produced and directed the 2007 documentary, *La Santa Muerte: Saint Death*.

Arizmendi López, known as El Mochaorejas for his practice of cutting off the ears of his captives. Aridjis's description of the drug cartel leader's estate gains credibility due to its many similarities to the Mexico City mansion of a Colombian cartel *jefe* raided three years later. Both, for example, include the presence of high-ranking government officials, opulent gardens, and private zoos with rare Siberian or white tigers (Lawson 60).

### **Love Magic and *Oraciones***

*Oraciones* to Santa Muerte were published, including in the United States and in English, decades before Santa Muerte became a ubiquitous popular icon tied to crime, *narcotraficantes*, and desperation. In her 1947 collection of Mexican folkways, Frances Toor reproduced the following prayer and its English translation:

*Muerte querida de mi corazón,  
no me desampares con tu protección  
y no me dejes a Fulano (here you mention the man's name)  
de tal momento tranquilo,  
moléstelo a cada momento,  
mortifícalo, inquiétalo  
para que siempre piense en mí.*<sup>19</sup> (Toor 144)

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19. "Beloved death of my heart, do not leave me unprotected and don't leave "John Doe" tranquil for one moment—molest him, mortify him, make him restless so that he will always think of me" (Toor 144)

John Thompson notes that Santa Muerte “began life as a specialist in love magic” and that these *oraciones* are the heirs of medieval Spanish love spells brought to Mexico by “colonial Spanish women of mixed race” and were also used for healing (406, 412-3). He characterizes the typical prayer to Santa Muerte as a “variant on the familiar Mediterranean refrain of love and domination, one of the Greatest Hits of the millennia” (418). Santa Muerte devotees, like medieval believers in magic and spells, pray to their saint for “all the things people want: love, luck, health, wealth, power, protection” and “domination over the will of others” (412).

Magic thrived in Spain from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century, and the confessions of those tried by the Spanish Inquisition for practicing magic include words and descriptions of practices that are reflected by contemporary Santa Muerte rituals and *oraciones*. María Helena Sánchez Ortega examined Inquisition records of the *auto de fe* of professional sorcerers practicing love magic through spells and incantations. Sánchez Ortega refers to “gypsy”(Roma) women being among these itinerant practitioners (60), which suggests the possibility of a connection between love magic in Spain with that ultimately from of India, generally accepted as the place of origin for Roma and with a strong tradition of magic (Glücklich 5587-5592). Freese notes that one of the many alternate names for Santa Muerte is “Santa Marta,” who is also invoked in love spells and is called “wicked Santa Marta” by Sánchez Ortega (61). “Recipe” books for love spells in Spain, Toor’s collection of Mexican folklore, and “how to” manuals of Santa Muerte veneration and *oraciones*<sup>20</sup> include similar language, including the request

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20. Juan Antonio Flores Martos calls these publications *recetarios* (cookbooks) and “*hágalo usted mismo*” (“do it yourself”) books (285). Ten of these manuals are included in the list of works cited: two books by Oriana Velázquez (*El Libro de la Santa Muerte*

that the object of the person's affection not "eat, drink, or rest" (Sánchez Ortega 78). To provide just one example, the manual *Los Poderes Mágicos de Santa Muerte: Manual Práctico de Trabajos Significado de los Colores, Ofrendas, Ritos, Velas, Veladoras, Culto, Oraciones, Protecciones, Altares*, purchased at a *puesto* marketing occult and spiritual items at a market in Oaxaca City, includes the following "Jaculatoria"<sup>21</sup> expressing the desire that Santa Muerte disturb the target of the request so that he or she will always think of the petitioner:

*Muerte querida de mi corazón*

*No me desampares de tu protección*

*Y no dejes a fulano . . .*

*Un solo momento tranquilo, moléstalo*

*A cada instante y no dejes de*

*Inquietarlo para que siempre piense en mí.*

*(Se rezan tres Padres Nuestros) (Los Poderes Mágicos 8)*<sup>22</sup>

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and *La Santa Muerte: milagros, ofrendas, oraciones y otros temas*); Guttman's *Práctica del culto a la Santa Muerte*; *La Niña Bonita, la Santa Muerte*; *Santa Muerte del hogar*; *Altares, ofrendas, oraciones, y rituales a la Santa Muerte*; *Los poderes mágicos de la Santa Muerte: manual de trabajos*; *El libro de La Santa Muerte: trabajos*; *Cantemos y rezemos a la Santísima Muerte, Novenario de la "Santísima;"* and "*La Santa Muerte: milagros, ofrendas, oraciones y otros temas*."

21. Short prayer.

22. Beloved Death of my heart

Do not leave me unprotected,

Do not allow [so-and-so] . . .

a single tranquil moment, bother him

every instant and do not cease to disturb him

so that he always thinks of me.

(Pray three Our Fathers)

Spanish love magic included the use of beans for casting spells; beans, as well as grains and seeds, appear in the *ofrenda* on Santa Muerte altars and embedded in the bottoms of statues marketed in *puestos* (Sánchez Ortega 78) (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Base of Santa Muerte statue purchased at La Providencia in Winston-Salem, NC. Photo © Christine Whittington.

Love magic was present in Mexico during the Colonial period as well as in Spain. Noemí Quezada found the Inquisition records housed in Mexico’s Archivo General de la Nación to be rich sources of information on the mágico-religious practices of *emsalmadores*,<sup>23</sup> Colonial-era healers who employed *oraciones*, underscoring the power of words during the colonial period. King Philip II of Spain installed the Inquisition in Mexico in August 1570, but the first *auto de fe* of the Santo Tribunal to address *oraciones* used for magical purposes was carried out in 1593 (Quezada 142). Among the

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23. “Spell-casters” (Sánchez Ortega 87).

many Inquisition-era *oraciones* cited by Quezada are those appealing to San Pascual Bailón and to demons (Lucifer and “el Diablo Cojo”<sup>24</sup>), and *conjuros*<sup>25</sup> involving *habas*,<sup>26</sup> and *palitos de romero*<sup>27</sup> (147). Quezada notes that during the Colonial period, as in contemporary México, “*a pesar de la represión, la magia invade y desplaza a la religión usando los mismos elementos, como son en este caso las oraciones*” (149).<sup>28</sup> Like the magic of today, the *magia* of colonial *oraciones* operated in three areas: therapeutic magic or healing, love magic, and protection; those that have survived to the present involve love magic (Quezada 149, 165). Although Quezada did not discover any *oraciones* mentioning Santa Muerte in the course of her examination of Inquisition records, those she examined contain wording very similar to that of contemporary petitions to Santa Muerte (Thompson 418). *Oraciones* specifically to Santa Muerte may date from the eighteenth century; Mathylde Reyes notes the deliberate creation of an *oración* to Santa Muerte at that time, designed to create faith, rather than fear, in believers (cited in Thompson 422).

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24. “The Lame Devil.”

25. Spells and *oraciones* to specific entities (Thompson 414).

26. Beans.

27. Rosemary sprigs.

28. “Despite repression, magic invades and displaces religion using the same elements, in this instance with *oraciones*.”

## ***La Promesa and Ofrenda***

*Ofrenda* is an integral part of Santa Muerte altars, as is true of other folk and authorized saints. Martha Egan, in her study of *milagros*,<sup>29</sup> notes that offerings made to deities or saints symbolizing a believer's concerns are "nearly universal and timeless" and include gifts ranging from miniature replicas of ailing body parts to human sacrifice (2). In his Foreword to Egan's *Milagros: Votive Offerings from the Americas*, Marion Oettinger writes of this practice as *la promesa*,<sup>30</sup> one of the major forces that drive folk religion in Latin America:

*La promesa* is a reciprocal contract, a covenant, if you will, between the believer and a sacred figure, usually a popular manifestation of a saint, the Virgin, or Christ. In return for favors granted—a saved marriage, a child restored to good health, an economic gain, a catastrophe averted—the faithful make solemn vows of reciprocity. . . . *La promesa* is a universal in Latin America and its bifurcated roots are pre-Columbian and European. (Oettinger vi)

Graziano, who refers to a *promesa* also as a spiritual contract or a petition, notes that it creates obligations on the parts of both folk saint and *promesero*, or the devotee who promises certain actions or gifts, such as *milagros*, in exchange for miracles (60). It has roots in ancient ritual, including Latin American indigenous practice in Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and Guatemala, as well as in Mexico (60-62). Precolumbian origins of *la promesa* include offerings of flowers, food, and blood from animal and human sacrifice

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29. Miniature offerings that represent the assistance requested of a deity (Egan 2).

30. The vow.

to Aztec deities (Egan 2). Egan notes that deities of the African Caribbean traditions of Santería, Vodun, and Candomblé also require offerings (6) and that this practice was essentially universal in the ancient Europe and still exists in Iberian countries; she cites a story that Hernán Cortés returned to Spain with an offering for Our Lady of Guadalupe Extremadura of a gold scorpion whose sting he had survived (Egan 11). The universality of providing offerings to deities was an intersection of Catholic and indigenous belief that could be exploited and strengthened within the spiritual conquest, but could also allow indigenous people the opportunity to create a form of Catholicism acceptable to the religious among the conquerors. The synchronism of this process makes it difficult to tease apart the origins of Santa Muerte offerings.

### **The Skeletal Image in Europe and Mexico**

In addition to the practices of *oraciones* and *ofrenda*, the image of Santa Muerte has a precedent in skeletal images used to reinforce the fall of Adam as the cause of death, to serve as a reminder that Christ's sacrifice ended human death, to warn of the presence of danger, and as a participant in the grim Dance of Death, a symbol of the Black Death that carried away eighty percent of the European population in the fourteenth century (Malvido 22-25). Graziano notes that in early Christianity the veneration of saints' relics in the form of bones, hair, teeth, and other body parts replaced the worship of pagan gods (11). Rituals and practice surrounding Santa Muerte are similar to those surrounding saints canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

The personification of death as the Grim Reaper appeared in images of the Dance of Death throughout Europe in the wake of the Black Death of 1348. The pestilence that decimated Europe underscored the fact that death is an equal-opportunity phenomenon, taking lives regardless of age, or social or economic station. It was during this time that the personification of death acquired the attributes of the scythe, hourglass, globe, cloak, and Franciscan habit (Malvido 24). In Catholicism and in the dramaturgy of *Semana Santa*,<sup>31</sup> a complete skeleton was used to indicate the mortality of all humans, the *memento mori* (Perdigón Castañeda 26; Malvido 23). Also in Spain appeared paintings of skeletal figures on the frames that formed part of *catafalques*<sup>32</sup>—one showing the “vain life of man” (Perdigón Castañeda 27, 29). Other symbols include poppies, a symbol of night; a distaff with broken thread foretelling early death; the apple as the poison fruit of Paradise that, with the serpent, was the cause of humankind’s death; and the color black (Perdigón Castañeda 27). These images represent a European source for Santa Muerte imagery.

In the thirteenth century, tarot cards and cards relating to games of chance such as *oca*<sup>33</sup> and *lotería*,<sup>34</sup> a board game similar to Bingo, used skeletal imagery (Perdigón Castañeda *Santa Muerte*, 38). William Beezley notes that the images on *lotería* boards and cards (see Figs. 11 and 12) formed “a taxonomy of the country’s social types.”

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31. Holy week; the week between Palm Sunday and Easter.

32. Funeral biers.

33. Goose.

34. Also called the Mexican Lottery.

According to Beezley, *lotería* first appeared in Naples, Italy, and arrived in Mexico after first being adopted by the French court in Paris, then Spanish royalty in Madrid. In Colonial Mexico, local artists created the ninety images of daily life, including skulls and skeletons, for the boards and cards (32-33).



Fig. 11. Mexican *lotería* boards with skull and crossbones. Released into the public domain by Alex Covarrubias, and used with permission.  
< [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loteria\\_boards.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loteria_boards.jpg) >

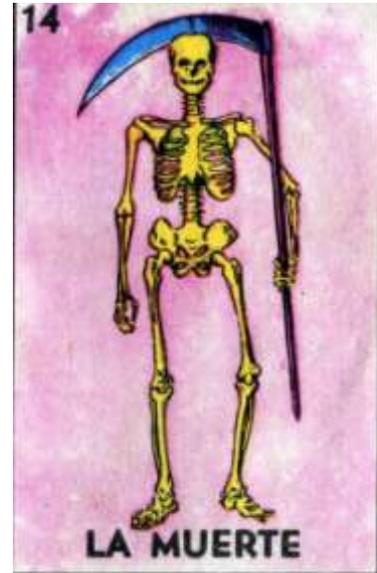


Fig. 12. Mexican *lotería* Muerte. Collection of the author. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

### **Intersection of Prehispanic and European Traditions in Mexico**

One of the earliest references to Santa Muerte is cited by Serge Gruzinski, quoting a witness who in 1797 described an iconoclastic ritual performed by “*indios*” at their *capilla*:

Let us move to the steppe plains of the north, to San Luís de la Paz in 1797.

Again, the stillness of the night reigned. Thirty or so Indians shut themselves up

in their chapel, drank *peyotl*, lit candles upside down, made little male dolls or figures (*muñecos*) “engraved on a piece of paper” dance, and struck crucifixes with wax candles. Then they tied a wet rope to the figure of Holy Death and threatened to whip and burn it if “it did not make a miracle” and grant them what they were asking for. (201)

Gruzinski’s account of Indians threatening to whip or burn Santa Muerte if she did not provide the miracle asked for is reflected in Perdigón Castañeda’s description of contemporary Santa Muerte adherents threatening to whip or burn the statue upside or turn it upside down if she does not grant the favor (84).

Santa Muerte is not the first skeleton to be venerated in Mexico; several other examples exist. One is the skeletal saint, San Pascualito Rey, venerated in Tuxtla, Gutiérrez, Chiapas. He represents the skeletal incarnation of the Spanish saint San Pascual Bailón as he appeared to an indigenous Guatemalan in 1650 (Thompson 420; Perdigón-Castañeda 124-25; Malvido 25).<sup>35</sup> Another is a small carved skeleton called Santa Muerte, which is venerated in Santa Ana, Michoacán, where it resides in the church of Santa Ana. Although Thompson does not cite the Santa Ana Santa Muerte as a direct source for the current popular folk saint, he does note that contemporary Santa Muerte candles are included among her offerings and that she wears Santa Muerte amulets (Thompson 420). Except for the recent intrusion of Santa Muerte artifacts into the Santa Ana saint’s veneration, these images do not seem to depend on one another as sources.

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35. Carlos Navarrete’s book, *San Pascualito Rey y el culto a la muerte en Chiapas*, is the most thorough treatment of this folk saint.

## Elements of Other Spiritual Traditions

A Veracruz Santa Muerte origin story, which Juan Antonio Flores Martos believes may connect Santa Muerte with the Santeria *orisha* Yemaya, is that of Santa Muerte Encarnada,<sup>36</sup> in which Santa Muerte appears as a beautiful young girl dressed in white with long blonde hair, sometimes called La Niña Blanca or La Flor Blanca (see Fig. 13).<sup>37</sup> According to Joseph Murphy, white is one of the colors associated with the *orisha* Yemayá's colors, her principle is maternity, which could correspond to the maternal aspects of Santa Muerte, and she is associated with the sea (42-43), which could be relevant in the port city of Veracruz.<sup>38</sup> My adviser, La Doctora, the *capellana* of a *capilla* in the Istmo de Tehuantepec, related the creation story of Santa Muerte as La Flor Blanca. The reference to an *embarcado*<sup>39</sup> suggests that the origin of this story may have been a port, such as Veracruz:

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36. Santa Muerte with flesh.

37. Sánchez-Ortega notes that untied hair had “sinful and erotic connotations” during the Spanish Inquisition, when female sorcerers accused of magic were described as letting their hair down before reciting incantations (74).

38. La Doctora states that Santa Muerte's feast day is Candlemas, the feast day of the Virgin of Candelaria, a manifestation of the Virgin Mary in Tenerife, the Canary Islands. The Santería *orisha* corresponding to St. Candelaria is Oyá whose principle is death (Murphy 42); Perdigon-Castañeda also notes connections between Santa Muerte and Oyá because Oyá is concerned with lightning, wind, and cemeteries. *Orishas* are Yoruba deities who mediate between a nonmanifest supreme being and humankind.

39. Sailor.

**La Doctora:** In the *Antigua Biblia Católica Apostólica Romana*<sup>40</sup> it is written that Santísima Muerte was a girl abandoned by her mother at the doors of the convent.

**The Author:** A convent?

**La Doctora:** She was abandoned there; the nuns adopted her and raised her. It is written that Santísima Muerte grew into adulthood and, by fate, a sailor came to the convent. This sailor fell in love with Santísima Muerte and told her that he would return to the convent at midnight to carry her away from the nuns in secret. He bought her a wedding gown and told her that she should wait for him at midnight so that he could take her away. Santísima Muerte then removed her nun's habit and put on the wedding dress. The prince [*sic*] never returned and left her waiting in her wedding gown. Santísima Muerte did not want to suffer any longer, so she removed the wedding dress and put on the nun's habit again. She went to the kneeler in the nuns' *capilla*, knelt, and began to pray before the cross, asking to remain a virgin for eternity because she would like to serve humanity, but she also wanted to be immortal so that she would not continue suffering. Then a small bird landed beside her, right beside the cross, and asked Santísima Muerte if she really wanted to remain a virgin. And she replied, "Yes." The small bird warned, "But you would have to remain a virgin for eternity, and your work would be very difficult." She responded that was not important because she would assume this responsibility and that she did want to be immortal. Then the little bird stuck out its tongue, put it in Santísima Muerte's nose, and began to drain

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40. The author has not identified the book containing this story.

her.<sup>41</sup> Because the little bird drained her body, Santísima Muerte is usually dressed and white and you can see her bones. She remained this way, embodied this way, as a skeleton in nun's vestments. She remained lifeless, but she also remained alive for eternity. From this moment, she was called "La Santísima Muerte." And she carries the world, she carries the scythe, she carries scales, and she drags a chain connected to the world on her right leg. This is why I tell people that Santísima Muerte is not evil. That Santísima Muerte does not want to take us. It hurts her very much to come for us and take us away. But she has to obey the Lord our God to fulfill the commandment she was given when she asked to be Santísima Muerte. God told her that, in this way, she would become immortal. People who hear her when she walks by hear the world turn. It is she who appears to carry away the dead. Sometimes she comes with a cart and yoke of oxen. She uses the cart to pick up the dead and carry them over the river. I tell people this version because I read it in the *Antigua Biblia Católica Apostólica Romana* in Mexico City. The priests have this Bible, but keep it hidden because in this Bible can be seen the incarnations of Santísima Muerte: the white Santísima Muerte

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41. This action by the small bird brings to mind a hummingbird, which uses its long tongue to drink nectar from flowers. In Mexico, hummingbirds are associated with blood, bloodletting (Miller and Taube 98), and magic. Thompson describes a "love magic package" sold at a *botanica* in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, containing a dried hummingbird tied with red thread—the color of love and passion—and stapled to a piece of cardboard (411). Ingham notes that men carry dead hummingbirds to "ensure sexual prowess"; that dried hummingbirds wrapped with a red ribbons, as described by Thompson, are used as love charms; and that the hearts of the tiny birds are sometimes eaten to bring luck (116). Like long, untied hair, the hummingbird's tongue has an erotic connotation. People in and from Mexico have told the author that hummingbirds are today considered symbols of success in love, especially for men who put signs proclaiming "*Picaflor*" ("Hummingbird") on their trucks, because hummingbirds are aggressive and travel from flower to flower, dipping their long tongues into each blossom.

means purity; the second stage is red, for the heart and for love; the third stage is black; that is when she appears to carry us away. So, inside our body we have these three incarnations of Santísima Muerte. (La Doctora)



Fig. 13. La Santa Muerte as La Flor Blanca. *Capilla* in Oaxaca City. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

The image of Santa Muerte as La Flor Blanca is displayed in La Doctora's *capilla* as well as a *capilla* in Oaxaca City (see Fig. 10). In addition to connections with the *orisha* Yemanyá, the story also brings to mind that of La Llorona, a border tale, involving a woman in a white wedding dress and veil who wanders the streets or *barrancas*<sup>42</sup> at night, crying for her lost children, whom she has in fact, murdered. When men stop to help her, they sometimes find that she has a skull rather than a face (Ingham 110).<sup>43</sup>

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42. Gullies or streambeds.

43. For a thorough treatment of La Llorona and her relationship with La Virgen de Guadalupe and Hernán Cortes's mistress, La Malinche, see Limón.

La Doctora's story of La Flor Blanca's abandonment and transformation into Santa Muerte reinforces Graziano's statement that "tragic death is the principal generator of folk devotion," along with "death's violation of youth and innocence," and virginity, especially among female folk saints who were "victims of their own beauty" and whose innocence, beauty, and chastity were violated by men (15-16).

Juan Antonio Flores Martos and John Thompson both relate a contemporary story placing the origin of Santa Muerte in Córdoba, Veracruz in 1800. Thompson found this legend in a magazine titled *Mundo Esotérico*, which referred to Santa Muerte as "one of the 'most controversial' images of Mexican magic":

In 1800, in Cordoba, Veracruz, a local sorcerer had a vision of the figure of Death in a dream. When he awoke, he shook off the frightening dream and went to his *consultorio*, that is, his office and consulting room, where he was stunned to find that the same image of Death had appeared on the roof. In fear, he ran to a nearby church and asked the priest to come see the image, but the priest refused, saying the image was proof that the sorcerer had been practicing black magic. Over the next few weeks, the image gradually faded, but the sorcerer began to have prophetic dreams wherein Death spoke to him. In the final dream Death ordered him to make an image of her and to burn red candles to her, promising all of her devotees a painless death. (Thompson 422)

A similar account was reported in the English-language newspaper *Oaxaca Times*, repeating the story that Santa Muerte appeared to "one Serge Guevara, forty years ago in Veracruz. Guevara, for his part, became a dedicated follower of Santa Muerte as a result of the apparition" (Martinez).

Hence, both textual and visual images of Santa Muerte have been documented for at least fifty years—long before the exponential growth in Santa Muerte veneration of the early twenty-first century—and the individual components of her iconography and veneration, such as her skeletal form and the format of oraciones to her, are much older. Some, such as the practice of offering gifts to deities, are close to universal. Because Santa Muerte veneration draws upon a variety of historic sources, “even chic intellectuals are beginning to say that the cult is *muy auténtico*” (Guillermoprieto "Troubled Spirits" 60).

## CHAPTER TWO

### CONTEMPORARY SANTA MUERTE PRACTICE

#### **Beginnings of Santa Muerte practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The precise time and place of the convergence of historical and contemporary sources into the image of Santa Muerte in current practice remains elusive. Some individuals recall their own experiences with Santa Muerte more than fifty years ago. Enriqueta Romero Romero, *capellana* of the primary Santa Muerte altar in the Tepito barrio of Mexico City, told *Washington Post* Mexico City correspondent William Booth that she had been worshipping Santa Muerte for fifty years (Booth, “Mexico’s Cult”). Romero is often cited as the first *capellana* of a Santa Muerte *capilla* in Mexico (Velázquez 8; H. Aridjis, “La Santa Muerte [or the Saint of Death]”; Walker; Guillermprieto, “Troubled Spirits” 60; Booth “Mexico’s Cult”). Perdigón Castañeda recalls childhood memories of prayers to Santa Muerte (13). Reproductions of *impresas* of Santa Muerte appear in Carlos Navarrete’s book on San Pascualito Rey, which was published in 1982. One of the earliest photographs of a statuette that appears to be Santa Muerte emerged in the aftermath of the 1989 death in Matamoros, Mexico, discussed below, of *narcotraficante* Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo and the capture of several of his followers.

What is different about the culture in which Santa Muerte came to exist, decades ago, from the current culture of ubiquity and notoriety surrounding the folk saint? Clearly, one variable is the rapid rise in drug violence, the prevalence of warring drug cartels, and what Booth describes as the “spectacularly gruesome” nature of murders and

assassinations attributed to, or claimed by, cartel members, “using violence as language to deliver a message to society” (“Mexico Drug Cartels”). Journalist Sam Quinones writes of the barrio of Tepito, the location of Enriqueta Romero’s *capilla*, “In the republic of Mexico, no barrio is older, more famous, or more infamous than Tepito” (234). The poorest of neighborhoods in the Aztec capital, Tepito later became Mexico’s center for black market contraband, or *fayuca*. With the lower tariffs brought about by GATT and NAFTA, the black market became less profitable, and the drug market replaced it as Tepito’s major industry (Quinones 234). Narcotraficantes have also replaced bandits as most revered outlaws in Mexico. Bandits were celebrated in Mexican *corridos*<sup>44</sup> for decades; *corridos* about *narcotraficantes* now have their own subgenre: the *narcocorrido*.<sup>45</sup> However, Guy Lawson writes that “the old kind of narco was generous—he helped people. Now they kill civilians, woman, kids while local police ‘look the other way’” (Lawson 79). Contributing to the chaos are alliances among *narcotraficantes*, police, and government officials and the disequilibrium caused by not knowing who is trustworthy. Lawson cites an investigation of federal police officers indicating that ninety percent had connections with drug cartels, with corruption reaching the highest levels of political power including the Subprocuraduría de Investigación Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada,<sup>46</sup> Mexico’s liaison to Interpol, and an adviser to President Calderón (Lawson 64). A bag of severed heads thrown onto the floor of a discotheque or

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44. Traditional Mexican ballads, usually accompanied by an accordion, set to a waltz tempo, and glorifying the exploits of bandits and others on the wrong side of the law.

45. For a thorough study of the *narcocorrido*, see Elijah Wald’s *Narcocorrido: A Journey into the Music of Drugs, Guns, and Guerrillas*.

46. Assistant Attorney General for the Special Investigation of Organized Crime.

a decapitated body displayed on a busy street, especially in Mexico where gruesome images posted directly to the Internet are clearly intended to frighten, intimidate, horrify, and warn others, as well as to reinforce the reputations of the perpetrators for ferocity, revenge, and mercilessness. Many times, butchered remains bear signs signaling this intent; many of these signs and threatening *narcomantas*<sup>47</sup> can be seen on the *Blog del Narco*. The public nature of these murders is a weapon in the war against and among *narcotraficantes*; skulls on a *tzomplantli*<sup>48</sup> served the same function when placed near ancient Aztec and Maya temples. The use of fearsome imagery has for millennia been an important aesthetic element in glorifying and underscoring the strength of a leader.

### **A Mexican Folk Saint**

Although awareness of Santa Muerte has expanded globally due to her ubiquitous presence in mass media, including the Internet, the folk saint remains closely tied to Mexican, specifically Mestizo, culture. Thompson notes that “Santísima Muerte, popular to the point of overkill in modern Mexico, is not mentioned in reports from other Latin American countries colonized by Spain” (418).<sup>49</sup> Several writers have noted similarities between the veneration of Santa Muerte in Mexico and the magical properties of San la Muerte in Argentina. Although both figures are skeletal and carry scythes, Argentine San

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47. Banners and signs erected by *narcotraficantes*.

48. A rack displaying the skulls of sacrificed captives near Aztec and Maya temples.

49. Thompson’s article was published in 1998. News about Santa Muerte veneration does, in fact, now appear in the news media internationally, but the stories are usually about events in Mexico.

la Muerte figures do not carry globes or scales, are generally small, meant to be carried, male—their creation story involves a king—and are often carved from human bone.<sup>50</sup> San la Muerte's purpose is similar to that of Santa Muerte in that he enhances success in love and provides protection from enemies. John Thompson believes that neither of these folk saints influenced the other but that the two similar traditions originated from the same Spanish images of death and *oraciones*, Graziano also interprets the similarities between these two folk saints as evidence of the image's Iberian roots.

Graziano notes that almost all devotees of folk saints are Catholic and have at their disposal a variety of saints who are capable of producing miracles and are sanctioned by the Catholic Church. In his exploration of folk saints in five Latin American countries, Graziano discovered that the reasons for venerating unauthorized folk saints in addition to canonized saints are “rather standard,” including a “preference for *lo nuestro*,<sup>51</sup> or belonging to the community, a “desire for freedom of devotion without mediation, restrictions, and costs of clergy,” the “belief that folk saints are more miraculous than canonized saints,” and that the folk traditions expand, rather than abandon, Catholicism. He found that appeals to folk saints are most frequent in matters relating to health issues necessitating miraculous cures, when a folk saint serves “as a secret weapon deployed as urgency warrants,” complementing prayers to canonized saints and visits to medical doctors. An appeal to a folk saint circumvents the bureaucracy of the church hierarchy and “bypasses institutional channels that have failed and makes its appeal directly to a friend on the inside” (Graziano 29-30, 33).

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49. For a thorough discussion of San la Muerte, see Frank Graziano's chapter on this Argentine folk saint in *Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America* (77-111).

51. Our own.

James S. Griffith explains the appeal for folk saints among Mexicans at lower socioeconomic strata, noting that folk saints profiled in his book include “one convicted murderer, two bandits, and three faith healers” (16):

As we move downwards on the Mexican socioeconomic scale, we also move farther and farther from the formal teachings of the contemporary Church, and enter a system that, though fully Catholic in its basic values and narratives, seems to have as a primary purpose survival in a hostile world. Another world, however, occupied by potential helpers and potential enemies, is also close at hand. Supernatural help is freely called upon, and dangers such as witchcraft are real and can be dealt with. (Griffith 10-11)

Graziano writes:

Folk saint devotions conform to devotees’ social, political, and economic status as outsiders. The marginality of their social station, of their villages and neighborhoods, and of their ethnicities is replayed in the marginality of their religious beliefs. The informal economy in which they labor is complemented by the informal saint to whom they pray. All aspects of their lives evidence institutional failure and informal compensations, and their religion conforms to this pattern. Folk saints are a component of the larger package of marginality. Devotees live in a parallel society that stakes its claims and produces its miracles on the margins” (33).

Mexican Journalist Alma Guillermoprieto, a visiting scholar at the Center for Latin American Studies at University of California, Berkeley in 2009, writes and lectures on

the “Mexico’s new *narcocultura*” (“Days of the Dead”; Cockrell). She writes that Mexicans

. . . have been overwhelmed by every possible difficulty—drought, an outbreak of swine flu followed closely by the collapse of tourism, the depletion of the reserves of oil that are the main export, an economic meltdown, and above all, the wretched gift of the drug trade and its highly publicized and gruesome violence. Although the total number of homicides in Mexico has actually decreased steadily over the past two decades, the crimes committed by the drug traders are insistently hideous and have so disrupted the rule of law that ordinary Mexicans regularly wonder aloud whether *las mafias* have already won their war against the Mexican state. (“Troubled Spirits” 59)

Guillermoprieto believes that drug-related crime, in particular, influences Santa Muerte veneration, stating, “As drug violence has intensified, so has the urge to draw strength—and hope—from the patron saint of desperate causes” (“Troubled Spirits” 55). Likewise, Graziano affirms that “it is not surprising that the needs brought to the attention of folk saints are predominantly those that ineffective government does not satisfy, notably basic health care and socioeconomic security. Folk saint devotions provide substitute satisfactions for deficiencies in secular as well as religious institutions. They offer improvised (and often symbolic) compensations for the lack of social services” (33).

Guillermoprieto explains why Santa Muerte appeals to many people imperiled by the drug trade—not just the criminals themselves who “are the only ones who have no reason to feel desperate in the crisis current obsessing their compatriots”:

It's not only the crisis but also the types of problems people face these days that have fueled the expansion of the cults. Let's say, for example, that you live in one of the cities along the border taken over by the drug trade and that the crackle of machine-gun fire bursts out every night, filling you with terror of stray bullets. Is it not understandable to pray for protection to someone like the outlaw narco-saint Jesús Malverde, whom drug traffickers revere? Mexicans who retain a strong connection to the Roman Catholic faith might turn instead to St. Jude Thaddeus. At a time when no-win situations abound he is experiencing a rise in popularity comparable only to that of Santa Muerte, perhaps because he is known in the Catholic Church as the patron saint of desperate causes. (Guillermoprieto, "Troubled Spirits" 59)

In addition to drug-related violence, other social developments jeopardizing Mexicans both in Mexico and in the United States are perilous border crossings between the United States and Mexico by undocumented immigrants, HIV, gender violence, and the kidnapping and murder of individuals unrelated to organized criminal activity. In desperate times, as Mexico is experiencing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, devout Catholics may appeal to more than one saint, and figures, amulets, and other products relating to a variety of folk saints can be purchased at a single market *puesto* (see Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. A statue of St. Jude in the Catemaco market, Catemaco, Veracruz, in the company of a rooster-footed devil and Santa Muerte (background). Photograph © Christine Whittington

Members of another marginal group may also feel that their concerns would not be addressed by the canonized Catholic saints, even St. Jude. Eva Aridjis's documentary film *La Santa Muerte: Holy Death* includes interviews with gay and transgendered prison inmates who maintain their own chapel to Santa Muerte, stating that they do not believe that their requests would be welcome in the Catholic Church. The author's husband purchased an *ex voto* including an image of Santa Muerte at an antique shop in Oaxaca City. *Ex votos* are narrative images with text giving thanks to a saint for favors granted and are usually placed in a church or shrine. In this *ex voto*, "Rosi Buenrostro" writes that she "gives thanks to Santa Muerte, la Niña Blanca, because Malena came to live with me" (see Fig. 15). Although the antique shop owner insisted that the women are a mother

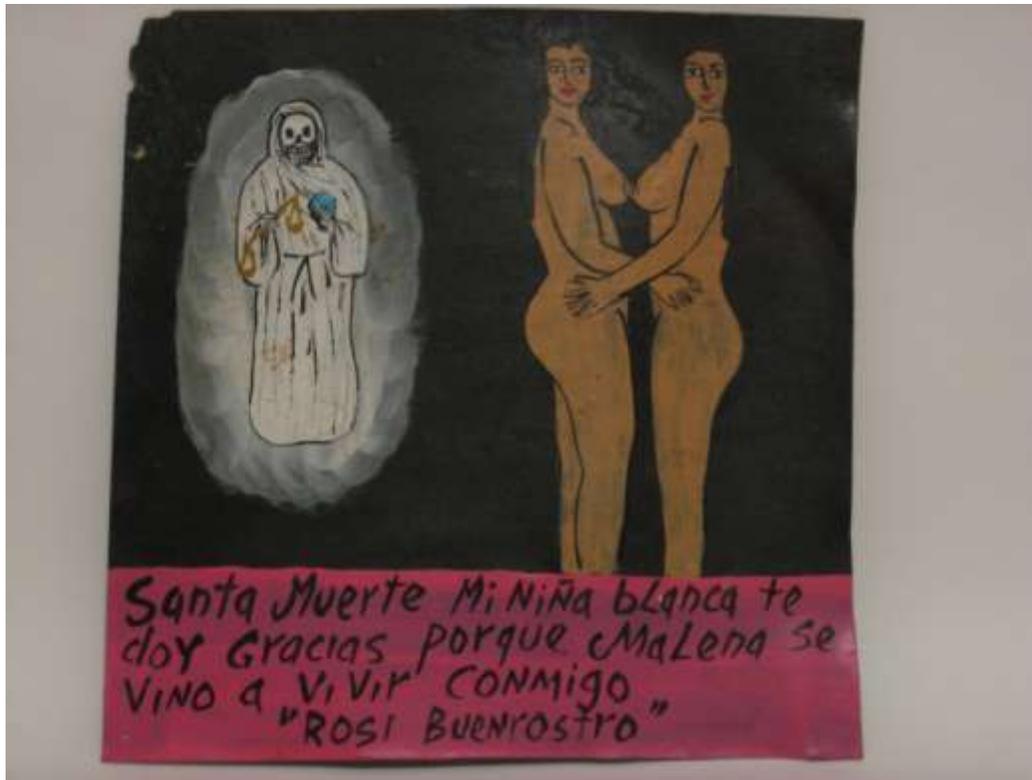


Fig. 15. *Ex voto* purchased in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca. Collection of the author. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

and daughter, the author believes that the *ex voto*, whether authentic or created for the art market, acknowledges the appeal of Santa Muerte to same sex couples, another group rejected by church and state.

The desperation brought about by crime and violence is compounded by uncertainty and chaos. Journalist Philip Caputo writes, “In the almost three years since President Felipe Calderón launched a war on drug cartels, border towns in Mexico have turned into halls of mirrors where no one knows who is on which side or what chance remark could get you murdered” (62). In his novella, “La Santa Muerte,” Homero Aridjis, a journalist who has written about Santa Muerte, refers to “*la imagen de la muerte violenta . . . estaba en boga en los últimos tiempos, adoraban su imagen los mismo los narcotraficantes que los secuestradores, los policías corruptos que los*

*delincuentes de poca monta, y tanto las amas de casa como los niños de la calle le rendían culto” (16).<sup>52</sup>*

### **Capillas, Altars and Images**

Santa Muerte images and practice are superficially consistent from altar to altar, throughout Mexico and the United States.<sup>53</sup> Santa Muerte’s attributes include her skeletal appearance, especially her defleshed skull, robes often tied with a rope, a scythe, a balance, a globe, and sometimes an hourglass. Although no central controlling authority for Santa Muerte veneration exists, corresponding, for example, to the Vatican for Roman Catholics, there is little variation in Santa Muerte iconography. The booklets for sale at *puestos* offering spiritual supplies and herbs function as “how-to” guides providing all the information an individual needs in order to create one’s own Santa Muerte altar. They specify how Santa Muerte altars should be constructed, what offerings should be made for what purposes, and include prayers, or orations, for a variety of needs. Most include the significance of the position and material of the statue and its base, the meanings of various offerings vis-à-vis the petitioner’s requests, and the significance of the colors of the robes (gold for economic success, white for purity, red for love and passion, green for justice, and black for total protection, especially against black magic or negative forces).

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52. The image of violent death was recently in vogue; *narcotraficantes* as well as kidnappers, corrupt police officers as well as juvenile delinquents, and housewives as well as street kids venerated her.

53. Images of Santa Muerte found on the Internet usually have the similar attributes wherever they are located within Mexico and the United States.

There is a great deal of overlap in the content of the guides, but explanations often conflict with one another. For example, the scythe is generally thought to sever the thread of life (Peña), but some guides state that it is for cutting negative energy or to symbolize prosperity gained from reaping crops (Velázquez, *El Libro* 13). In another interpretation, La Doctora told me that Santa Muerte uses it to “support herself and till the soil. She uses the scythe to walk and to bury the dead” (La Doctora).

Santa Muerte figures photographed at the *puesto* of a vendor of occult items at the *mercado municipal* in Catemaco, Veracruz, exemplify many of the characteristics of Santa Muerte statues. A statue of Santa Muerte with white robes in the style of Santa Muerte del Viento<sup>54</sup> (see Fig. 16) includes a base incorporating skulls, a scythe detailed to look like wood with an additional skull in the intersection of handle and blade, a globe, and a gold belt with a scales of justice attached. The black Santa Muerte figure to the right stands on a base that includes coins, for gaining money, and an owl, reflecting the idea that instructions on creating Santa Muerte altars include placing bones of night creatures, such as owls or bats, in the bases of the statues (*Las poderes mágicos*, 32). The windblown drapery, exaggerated scythe, and plethora of skulls in addition to the skeletal face of Santa Muerte herself, are reminiscent of the fantasy genre of art exemplified by Frank Frazetta (1928-2010) and his followers.<sup>55</sup> Some Santa Muerte figures have wings;

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54 . Santa Muerte of the Wind, in reference to the windblown robe.

55. See especially Frank Frazetta’s 1970 painting, “Woman with Scythe” (Frazetta, Fenner, and Fenner, 93) which, in turn, reflects Francisco Goya’s “Woman Reflected as a Serpent on a Scythe,” Museo del Prado, 1797-1798 (Honatilla 67). The work of Frazetta’s followers, especially that of British fantasy artist Abrar Ajmal, bears a remarkable resemblance to some of the Santa Muerte figures of the *del viento* style. Ajmal’s illustrations can be seen by visiting his website; especially notable are “The Angel of Death,” a winged and hooded skeletal figure standing atop a mound of dying

my adviser La Doctora explained that this is because Santa Muerte is the angel of death, an identification supported by Elsa Malvido (109) (see Fig. 17).



Fig. 16. Santa Muerte figures with box of “Rattle Viper Sperm Incense” (label in Spanish and English). Photographed by the author at the *mercado municipal*, Catemaco, Veracruz, México. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

This Santa Muerte figure carries an owl on her right arm, as do many of the Santa Muerte images observed and photographed in Veracruz and Oaxaca.

The owl, called a *tecolote*, *búho*, or *lechuzo* in Mexican Spanish,<sup>56</sup> is an important element of the Mexican supernatural as well as mythology and folklore globally and

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humans ([http://www.aillustrations.com/xl\\_images/03.jpg](http://www.aillustrations.com/xl_images/03.jpg)), and “The Grim Reaper” ([http://www.aillustrations.com/xl\\_images/15.jpg](http://www.aillustrations.com/xl_images/15.jpg)), a skeleton with hooded, windblown drapery who carries a scythe, rides a skeletal horse, stands atop a rock littered with skulls, and displays skulls strung on a chain attached to the horse trappings.

56. The Spanish word for “owl” depends upon the species and the geographic location. *Tecolote* is used primarily in Mexico and is a Nahuatl word. All types of owls, however, have connections with *magia*. It is the author’s impression that owls appear with Santa Muerte more frequently in Oaxaca than in other locations or on the Internet; this cannot be determined without further study.

throughout history. Because owls are nocturnal, they have been associated with Satan, the darkness of the underworld, and death, but they also represent wisdom and are attributes of the Greek goddess Pallas Athena, her Roman counterpart Minerva, and the Catholic Saint Jerome. Within the shamanic traditions of the Siberian and Inuit indigenous peoples, owls are considered totemic assistants (Dunnigan 6936-6937).<sup>57</sup> Owls exemplify the duality inherent in Mesoamerican religion and folklore. In both Maya and Aztec mythology, owls are associated with the gods of the underworld. During the Maya Classic period, owls were omens of death and destruction and were messengers from the lords of Xib'alb'a, the underworld (Whittington 39; Miller and Taube 128). The Aztec lord of the underworld, Mictlantecuatl, was, like Santa Muerte, represented as a skeleton accompanied by an owl (Fernández-Kelly 522). Because they have wings and can fly, owls are similar to angels and other supernatural beings, but their nocturnal nature connects owls with death and darkness (Dunnigan 6936).<sup>58</sup> In Mexico, witches called *tlahuelpuchi* are believed to turn themselves into owls or hens in order to suck the blood of small children or perform other evil acts (Scheffler, 84).

Contemporary Maya consider owls' hoots to be warnings from the underworld (Whittington 39) and, in Mexico, the mention of owls evokes the saying, "*Cuando el*

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57. Dunnigan notes owls indicate night and death in Egyptian hieroglyphs; they are unclean and omens of evil in ancient Judaism; the Hindu god of death; and are carved on Chinese funeral urns. Owls were also signs of darkness and death for Etruscans and Celts (6936). Ovid's *Metamorphoses* includes references to goddesses of the underworld changing into, or changing others into, owls (Dunnigan 6936; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 2; Isaiah 34:14; Job 30:29).

58. In addition to the scythe (see note 14), the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya also used the image of the owl in his work. In his series of etchings, *Los Caprichos*, the owl represents "the dark forces of the irrational" (Dunnigan 6936).

*tecolote canta, el indio muere.*<sup>59</sup> The saying is so well-known that every person I spoke with in Mexico about the association between Santa Muerte and owls repeated it as a reason for the presence of owls in Santa Muerte imagery; it also appears in Toor's collection of Mexican folklore (541). In the Mexican tradition of shamanism, owls are one of the creatures associated with *naguals*, shapeshifters throughout Mexican folklore who turn themselves into animals in order to perform misdeeds.

Like the scythe, the meaning of the owl in association with Santa Muerte varies from devotee to devotee. Velázquez' guide proposes that the owl's sharp senses improve believers' intelligence, knowledge, and orientation (15). Guttman states that the owl has ties with the forces of the underworld and can sense and protect devotees from evil (20).

According to La Doctora:

The owl means peace; it is one of Santísima Muerte's favorite animals. Why, I don't know if you have heard that sometimes people here say that "*cuando el búho canta, el indio muere.*" Well, this is true. It is because of this that she carries the owl. First, it goes to sing to the person so that the person knows that someone in the house is going to die. Then it really is the truth that she uses the owl; it is a very good bird for her. (La Doctora)

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59. This saying is translated by Toor as "When the owl hoots, the Indian dies" (541).



Fig. 17. Winged Santa Muerte. Catemaco market, Catemaco, Veracruz. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

### **Reception by Church and State**

Graziano notes that almost all devotees of folk saints are Catholic and “have access to a multitude of canonized saints, all of whom are recognized as miraculous” (29). Catholic priests who have been interviewed regarding Santa Muerte’s position with the Catholic Church have responded by calling devotees misguided or mistaken. Some point out that the Iglesia Católica Tradicional México-Estados Unidos, which has accepted Santa Muerte since 2002 (Perdigón Castañeda 108), does so in order to exploit the naïveté of

believers through commercialization.<sup>60</sup> La Doctora maintains a good relationship with Catholic priests who come to celebrate Mass. She believes that Santa Muerte works through God the Father because He sent her to collect the dead. Her priest, Father Juanito, has given La Doctora “*toda libertad de continuar el culto a la Santísima Muerte.*”<sup>61</sup>

Petitions to saints regarding desperate causes are certainly not exclusive to Santa Muerte nor are they specific to those in danger of violence or in search of illegal profit. Although current media accounts emphasize adherents’ petitions to Santa Muerte for assistance in issues involving criminal behavior, avoidance of prison or protection of the imprisoned, gaining money, or winning or retaining the object of one’s desire, other folk saints have for generations been the objects of such requests. Many Catholics in the United States pray to St. Anthony to recover lost items,<sup>62</sup> bury a statue of St. Joseph in the yard in order to expedite sale of a home (“Saint Joseph Home Selling Kit”), or petition St. Jude with lost causes, including on a web site on which petitions in several categories can be posted (“National Shrine of St. Jude”).

Like the Catholic Church, the Mexican government has an increasingly hostile relationship with Santa Muerte veneration. On one wall of La Doctora’s *capilla* is a

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60. The self-proclaimed leader of the *Iglesia Católica Tradicional México-Estados Unidos*, David Romero, was arrested in January 2011 and charged, along with seven others, for kidnapping and laundering ransom money (Wilkinson).

61. Freedom to continue venerating La Santísima Muerte.

62. The author’s Irish-American mother-in-law, for example, prays to St. Anthony for lost items, including her lost wedding ring, and the author’s husband prayed to St. Anthony for the safe return of a pet cat. Both ring and cat reappeared, whether or not St. Anthony was responsible. Neither of these individuals expressed concern about these petitions being inappropriate for St. Anthony.

framed photograph of Santa Muerte de Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán, dated 31 October 2000 and issued by the government agency CONACULTA, INAH (Mexico's Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia). The certificate marks the return of the statue and cites La Doctora's town as a site of Santa Muerte veneration. It is signed by CONACULTA anthropologist Judith Katia Perdigón Castañeda, an ironic commemoration in light of government strikes against Santa Muerte *capillas* in border towns along the U.S.-Mexico border such as Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo. In March 2009, city workers in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, destroyed thirty-five Santa Muerte statues because of their perceived connection with drug traffickers. In the Fox News article about the destruction, both government workers and statue owners asked that their names not be used because of fear of retaliation ("Mexico Destroys 'Death Saint'").

Kevin Freese and Tony Kail ("Santísima Muerte"), writing from national security and law enforcement perspectives, respectively, express alarm regarding the appearance of Santa Muerte north of the U.S.-Mexican border, as though it were a contagion spread by Mexican immigrants with *narcotraficante* or criminal tendencies. Some of the concern surrounding Santa Muerte may originate with misunderstood translation. Mexican writers often use the word *culto* to refer to Santa Muerte veneration, and U.S. journalists usually translate the Spanish word *culto* as the English cognate "cult," in the contemporary, popular usage of "cult" as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* compilers in 2004 ("Cult"). The *OED* cites a 1980 article in the *American Journal of Sociology* as the etymological source for this usage of "cult" as a "deviant social movement." Frank Graziano notes that, among North Americans, "The word 'cult' can suggest fanaticism or

even deviant strangeness reminiscent of such groups as Heaven's Gate or the Manson Family" (ix).

In his 1991 article on Satanism scares, Gerry O'Sullivan pinpointed events in the late 1980s and early 1990s that either fueled or exemplified fears of threats from Satanic cults—a term used by some writers, including Kevin Freese, to describe Santa Muerte veneration. Events cited by O'Sullivan include a nonexistent but feared and suspected international meeting of Satanists in Washington, D.C., fears about abductions of primarily Caucasian children for the purposes of human sacrifice, and the fear that alienated family adolescents were in danger of being recruited by Satanic cults (O'Sullivan).

One of the incidents fueling these rumors about cult activity was the 1989 kidnapping and murder—allegedly through human sacrifice—of American medical student Mark J. Kilroy in Matamoros, Mexico, by Adolfo de Jesús de Constanzo and his followers. Constanzo was the leader of a cult loosely based on the Afro-Caribbean religious tradition of Palo Mayombe, into which he had been initiated, and responsible for the murder of at least twelve individuals, including Kilroy. Constanzo's rituals included torture, dismemberment, sexual violation, and human sacrifice, which are not components of the Palo Mayombe religious tradition. A figurine with characteristics of contemporary skeletal Santa Muerte images, including a scale, globe, and nimbus (see Fig. 18) was found by authorities at the Matamoros ranch used for Constanzo and his followers, leading to conjecture about a relationship between Constanzo's criminal activity and Santa Muerte veneration (Freese; Kail, "Santa Muerte" 4). Freese cited this figure as evidence of a connection between veneration of Santa Muerte and Constanzo's

ritual butchery, but it should also be noted that the owner of the statue has not been publicly identified.<sup>63</sup>



Fig. 18. Artifacts recovered from the ranch used by Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo, including figure resembling la Santa Muerte, with a skull, scale, and globe. (Humes Plate 10) Photograph © Penguin Group. Reproduced with permission.

The titles and content of news articles about Santa Muerte reinforced the pejorative translation of *culto*, as opposed to the traditional meaning, “a particular form or system of religious worship” (“Cult”). A 2004 article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* was titled “St. Death Calls to the Living in Mexico City: ‘Cult of the Skinny Girl’ Spreads” (Ferriss). Blogs worldwide repeated the story of Juana Barraza, a

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63. Constanzo’s companion, Sara Aldrete, calls these items “Santos” and indicates that they belonged to another follower (97). See *Buried Secrets* by journalist Edward Humes for an account of the activities of Adolfo Constanzo and the Matamoros murders.

Mexican *lucha libre* wrestler, who was found to have an altar to the “death cult” of Santa Muerte in her home, including offerings of apples, tequila, and a snake in a glass jar (“Capturaron a ‘Mataviejitas’; Mexico’s ‘Little Old Lady Killer’”).<sup>64</sup> Others, such as Lynne S. Walker’s 2004 article in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, “Skeleton Force,” emphasized the frightfulness of skeletons.

The most detailed of the U.S. publications on the connection between Santa Muerte and the criminal world is a study by Kevin Freese, a researcher on Latin America writing under the auspices of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command’s Foreign Military Studies Offices in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (Freese; Forest 513). Freese titled his study, “The Death Cult of the Drug Lords: Mexico’s Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed,” and includes primarily online sources, including discussion list and blog posts. While Freese’s research does emphasize the connection between Santa Muerte veneration and *narcotraficantes* and uses “cult” in the pejorative sense, especially in the title, Freese explains that his usage of the term “really applies to the series of rituals and practices associated with religious worship,” comparable to “the cult of the Blessed Virgin in Christianity.” Spanish-language writers discussing Santa Muerte use the word *culto* to refer to the practice of venerating her. When Mexican writers wish to indicate the existence of a cult as defined by the *OED* as “a relatively

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64. A Google search on 28 January 2010 combining the terms “cult” and “Santa Muerte” with either Barraza or Mataviejitas retrieved 554 results, including blogs, discussion groups, and news sites. Specifying that the search include the phrase “death cult” resulted in 71 hits.

small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister” (“Cult”), they tend to use the word *secto*.<sup>65</sup>

In summarizing his study done for the Foreign Military Studies Office, researcher Kevin Freese found that Santa Muerte veneration “is anti-establishment and appears to glorify criminal behavior.” He connects Santa Muerte veneration with the Mara Salvatrucha gang and with the Gulf Cartel. He does, however, note that “not all members of the cult are criminals,” and that Santa Muerte veneration is a “veritable embodiment of the sense of dissatisfaction, exclusion, isolation, and despair among the marginalized in Mexican society.”

#### **Commerce, Market, and *Turismo***

John Thompson, author of the first article on Santa Muerte to appear in an academic journal in the United States, describes his purchase of Santa Muerte perfume in Tucson, Arizona, in 1997, nine years before the Mexican government’s crackdown on the drug cartels led to escalating violence. The strawberry candy-scented Santa Muerte perfume was manufactured by the Skippy Corporation of Detroit and Los Angeles (Thompson 406). Thompson found Santa Muerte items for sale at the Southwest Supermarket stores in Arizona, Texas, California, and New Mexico (407-8). Thompson later found Santa Muerte items produced in Chicago, including incense manufactured by the Indio Poderoso Company (407). He also sheds light on the origin of at least some

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65 . Sara Aldrete uses the word *secto* rather than *culto* throughout her memoir, *Me Dicen la Narcosatánica*, to refer to the Matamoros enclave led by Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo.

printed Santa Muerte *oraciones*, describing how an owner of Citrun Nueve Santiago, a Mexico City publisher, and his colleagues “dream up new *oraciones* to print” for *Santería*, *Vodun*, Satanism, and Wicca as well as Santa Muerte (410). The author has found that many Santa Muerte products purchased in Mexico, as well as other occult items, include English text. Although out of the scope of the present study, it is clear that the manufacturer and marketing of Santa Muerte items could be examined in the same context with which Carolyn Morrow Long, in her book *Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce*, examined spiritual products offered for sale at *botánicas* and shops selling spiritual items in the United States.

Santa Muerte images appear in a variety of contexts in Oaxaca City in addition to *puestos* in the market and *capillas* intended for veneration. Apart from the formal Santa Muerte veneration that is practiced at altars and in *capillas* in Oaxaca, which are very different from those in Mexico City, especially Tepito, Santa Muerte as an icon of popular culture appears to be very similar to the popular Santa Muerte images that can be observed internationally in tattoos, graphic art, graffiti, commercial items, t-shirts, skateboards, and other items available for purchase in stores and online. Graziano notes that tattoos, especially, make physical contact with a folk saint permanent because the image is etched into the skin (59), reinforcing the action of contagious magic.

Items of Santa Muerte apparel could be purchased in a shop near my Oaxaca residence on the Paseo Benito Juárez, also called *El Llano*.<sup>66</sup> The name and logo of the shop, “King Monster 666,” was also painted on a wall near the small shopping area

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66. A flat field or prairie; in Oaxaca City, *El Llano* is an expansive city park, much larger than and not far from the *Zócalo*, or city plaza.

where the shop was located. The t-shirts that La Doctora had given to Fernando and me included “King Monster 666” logos. Although La Doctora’s Santa Muerte veneration seemed to relate more to the tradition of *curanderismo* than to street culture, she or her family members had clearly had some contact with popular culture aspects of Santa Muerte. The t-shirt that La Doctora had given Fernando was an image with the figure of Santa Muerte superimposed on a *tilmàtli*<sup>67</sup> in the manner of the traditional image of La Virgen de Guadalupe. A salesman at the shop told me that the skull and skeletons are important images because death is a “leveler” of rich and poor. The employee had a tattoo of a skull and, when I asked him about it, he directed my attention to a poster on the shop door advertising his friend’s former tattoo studio, Sin Límites, on Calle García Vigil. The salesman attempted to describe the artist’s current location and I may have found him by asking proprietors of a copy shop at the Garcia Vigil location. They directed me to a tattoo shop, where I later conducted an interview with an artist. The artist agreed to compile photographs of Santa Muerte tattoos for me to examine, but upon my return to the shop, he told me that it would be best not to show them to me because of the need to maintain the confidentiality of his customers.

Mass communication, including the Internet, has made Santa Muerte items and information—and misinformation—accessible on a global scale. In Mexico, a kidnapper housed in the Center for Enforcement of the Legal Consequences of Crime, a prison in Mexico City, learned about Santa Muerte on television. His understanding of Santa Muerte is that she will grant prayers, “but only in exchange for payment, that payment

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67. According to legend *tilmátli* is the maguey cloak worn by the peasant Juan Diego who was said to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary in 1531, on the hill of Tepeyac, outside Mexico City. Juan Diego carried flowers to his bishop in his *tilmátli* as proof of the Virgin’s presence.

must be proportional to the size of the miracle requested, and the punishment for not meeting one's debt to her is terrible" (Guillermoprieto, "Troubled Spirits" 71-72). Santa Muerte has even entered the realm of horror tourism, with a page on the Haunted America website, where the author connects Santa Muerte with Ghede, an *orisha* of Haitian *vodun*, and also states that she is the wife of Krampus, a malicious alternative to St. Nicholas popular "notably among the descendants of Austrian immigrants" (Masters).

## CHAPTER THREE

### A MEXICAN CONCEPT OF DEATH

Santa Muerte's name and skeletal appearance in most of her manifestations has naturally led the media to connect her with the physical state of death. Newspaper and magazine headlines, especially those in U.S. publications, frequently translate Santa Muerte as "Saint Death," "Holy Death," or the "Saint of Death." In these articles, death imagery represents something sinister and threatening, perhaps in the same way that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century seafarers understood the skull and crossbones of the Jolly Roger flown by pirate ships to represent a threat intended to instill fear. The association of the figure of Santa Muerte with sites and incidences of criminal activity, as described in Chapter II of the present study, no doubt contribute to a one-dimensional interpretation of Santa Muerte's skeletal as sinister.

In order to understand the significance of a Mexican folk saint that, for the most part, assumes the appearance of a skull and skeleton—a dead human—it is important that we examine the literature relating to the existence, or not, of a Mexican concept of death and to consider how these theories might be applied to Santa Muerte and her veneration. The rise in popularity of *el Día de los Muertos*<sup>68</sup> in both Mexico and the United States has generated an examination of the existence of a Mexican concept of death that can help us create a lens through which to appreciate Santa Muerte and her veneration. John Thompson identified no historical connection between the skeletal figure of Santa Muerte

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68. The Day of the Dead

and those of Day of the Dead (409). Although the Santa Muerte and *el Día De Los Muertos* have little in common other than the ubiquity of skeletons, one other commonality stands out: the use of the skeletal image to reinforce diverse ideas of national identity on both sides of the border.

Stanley Brandes's exploration and criticism of texts and theories on Mexican concepts of death, especially as they pertain to *el Día de los Muertos* activities, present a useful starting point for discussing Santa Muerte. Brandes notes, "From what we read and hear, there exists a unique Mexican view of death. Scholars, journalists, critics, and writers from both Mexico and the United States tell us so" ("Mexican View of Death" 128). He regards Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude* as "the most influential interpretation of Mexican national character" because it "summarizes a range of popular opinions on how Mexicans relate to death," and also cites other literary critics, anthropologists, and folklorists ("Mexican View of Death" 128):

The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain, or irony. "If they are going to kill me tomorrow, let them kill me right away." (Paz 57-58)

Brandes distilled the recurrent themes in the literature on Mexican attitudes toward death into a list replete with contradictions:

1. Mexicans are obsessed with death.

2. Mexicans fear death.
3. Mexicans do not fear death.
4. Mexicans are stoic in the face of death.
5. Mexicans defy the prospect of death in order to appear manly.
6. Mexicans are fond of, and even crave, death.
7. Mexicans play with death.
8. Mexicans are surrounded by and live side by side with death.
9. Mexicans express a fatalistic acceptance of death.
10. Mexicans perceive life and death as indivisible.

(“Mexican Views of Death” 130)

He concludes that “rather than take the list of claims at face value, as representing the Mexican state of mind, we would do well to interpret it as a construction of national character, as a projection of views about the Self and Other.” Noting that “people construct collective identities through differentiating their group from others,” Brandes posits that, while providing several pieces of evidence that North Americans do indeed possess many of the same attitudes toward death as Mexicans, “the meaning of death and the nature of mortuary rituals have become central to the construction of what it means to be Mexican” especially in a “multicultural context” with “binary oppositions” in which “contrasting views of death are just one of the many ways in which we distinguish Mexicans from Anglos” (“Mexican Views of Death” 130-131).

Brandes notes that stereotypes regarding Mexicans’ “unique relationship to death” are sometimes valid: “Mexicans, in fact, sometimes do seem to disdain death, play with death, and confront it directly while still holding it at a distance. It is just that these

attitudes do not predominate. Rather “they are largely confined to a particular time of year: the Day of the Dead,” and that “it is the popularity and commercial promotion of the Day of the Dead that is largely responsible for creating the essentialist image of a macabre Mexican” (“Mexican Views of Death” 138).

Graziano’s interpretation of the significance of death in Latin American Catholicism is at the same time gentler than that of Octavio Paz and more distinctive than that of Stanley Brandes. He believes that among this population, the dead “assist and protect family members on earth, serving as intermediaries and advocate . . . between humans and God” (9), that death “is for deployment of its otherworldly powers to improve one’s life in this world” (11). For Graziano, the Mexican concept of death

implies more of change of state and status than a permanent absence from the world of the living. The dead are actors in everyday life. They communicate with the living (often in dreams) to exert their influence and offer their guidance.

Together the living and the dead constitute a kind of extended family, a community divided between this world and the next. (9)

Because folk saints are, as Graziano states, “very special dead people” (10), it follows that Santa Muerte, the personification of death, would be a popular folk saint. Because Santa Muerte is a skeleton, she is made of the same human remains as saints’ relics, she is a natural object of veneration because she reflects the images of death and suffering on display in so many Catholic Churches in Europe and Mexico (Graziano 10-11). As noted in Chapter I of the present study, the bones of saints were venerated in the Catholic Church since early Christianity. Although Mexican statistics on life expectancy, mortality rates and infant mortality rate show improvement in the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries, the mortality rate over the lifetime of each individual still remains one hundred percent. That has not changed since the preoccupation with death imagery in the Middle Ages; death comes to everyone.

The international exposure to Santa Muerte, largely due to the Internet, may now be also playing the same role in reinforcing the idea of the morbid Mexican character, and thus underscoring a sense of nationalism relating to danger and the macabre. Brandes notes that the *calavera*,<sup>69</sup> which has a long history in Mexican graphic art, especially that of José Guadalupe Posada, “combines Precolumbian and colonial European representations of death,” and is a “symbol of Mexican national identity” most in evidence during *el Día de los Muertos*, now a tourist destination (“Mexican View of Death” 139).

Stanley Brandes demonstrated how the Mexican tourism industry successfully exploited the popularity of *el Dia de los Muertos* to the point that it was very different, and much more commercial, than the original holy days, effectively creating a lucrative identity with death for Mexico (“The Day of the Dead”; *Skulls to the Living* 69-92). It is possible that the identification of Mexico with images of death, as a component of national identity, has also had a role in the popularity of Santa Muerte. Because of connections between Mexico and death imagery resulting from the international popularity of Day of the Dead altars and decorations, Santa Muerte, by extension, is identified as a Mexican image. Gruesome images of death, as described in Chapter II of the present study, contribute to the construction of a fearsome identity.

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69. *Calavera* means “skull”; *calavera* is also the name used for humorous poems and drawings, usually featuring skeletons, satirizing political and other public figures and associated with *Día de los Muertos* festivities.

In the case of *narcocultura*, the fearsome identity is associated with the elite among the *narcotraficantes* and bandits who operate outside the boundaries of the law. Gifford notes that *corridos*, “Mexican folk ballads of the border region, take violence as a major theme, as do today’s *narcocorridos* (story songs celebrating the exploits of Mexico’s drug runners and dealers)” (Griffith 16). Graziano notes that the *capellán* of Jesús Malverde’s shrine distributes to the poor the generous offerings given by *narcotraficantes*, based on their profits from the drug trade, thus providing an “informal social service” (39).

As demonstrated in Chapter II, skeletal imagery has a long history and has not always been intended to frighten. The skull of the *memento mori* reminds the observer that death comes to all of humankind, regardless of station, but that Christ’s sacrifice ended death. However, when the skull became associated with threat and savagery, as it did during the golden age of piracy, observers learn to be afraid. *Narcotraficantes* and criminals who are Santa Muerte devotees did not fail to notice the reaction the skeletal image invoked, especially in border towns where drug violence is pervasive as well as in U.S. cities, such as Tucson, where *narcotraficantes* are becoming more active. Like the cheerful skeletons of the Day of the Dead, Santa Muerte has become associated with Mexican identity but, in this case, the dollars are coming not from U.S. tourism but from U.S. demand for illegal drugs.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONTEMPORARY SANTA MUERTE PRACTICE IN OAXACA

Media coverage of contemporary Santa Muerte practice focuses on the earliest public altars and *capillas* in the Tepito barrio of Mexico City,<sup>70</sup> and in cities along the Mexico's border with the United States, including Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, Monterrey, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, and Tijuana. Although none of Mexico's thirty-one states is free of drug cartel operations (Cockrell), these cities are among those most affected by *narcotraficante* violence, especially since the drug cartels' explosive response to the Mexican government's military attack on them, which began in 2006.<sup>71</sup> Descriptions of Santa Muerte veneration often include or accompany stories of drug cartel activity, drug-related murders, illegal border crossing, or other activities involving extreme violence or desperation, perhaps due to a certain sensationalism that is considered marketable and profitable by some media publishers. Examples of print and electronic newspaper and magazine headlines include "Mexico's Cult of the Death Saint" (Booth, "Mexico's Cult"), "Drug Gang Kills Rivals at Mexican Death Cult Shrine" ("Drug Gang"), "Santa Muerte: The New God in Town" (Gray), and "Saint Death Calls to the Living in Mexico City" (Ferriss).<sup>72</sup> Because Santa Muerte *capillas* and altars are indeed located in these

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70. See Chapter II for a discussion of Santa Muerte veneration in Tepito.

71. Journalists, social scientists, and policy analysts who have identified the Calderón administration's war on drugs as the turning point in the escalation of cartel violence include Guillermprieto, Caputo, Freeman, Hanson, Hernandez, and Quinones ("State of War").

72. The articles themselves are often far more nuanced and thoughtful than the headlines suggest, indicating a divide between media publishers, who are pressured for

cities, and the cities are newsworthy because of the extreme and frequently gruesome violence that occurs there,<sup>73</sup> news correspondents covering cartel and gang violence also have opportunities to observe and publicize Santa Muerte rituals. Therefore, it is easy for the public to believe that Santa Muerte practice is tied exclusively to criminal activity, *narcotraficantes*, kidnapping, and gruesome executions, many of which have been reported worldwide (A. Avila).

Santa Muerte veneration does occur in areas of Mexico where drug-related criminal activity is not a constant presence and not as threatening to visitors as in the Tepito barrio and areas defined by *narcocultura*. In more peaceful and less populous areas, Santa Muerte *capillas* and altars have not been extensively documented previously because they exist outside areas with pervasive drug-related violence. When Santa Muerte veneration occurs in situations far removed from the constant threat of violence, a radical departure from drug- and gang-related devotional activity can be observed, as will be evident in this study of La Doctora, a *capellana* with altars located at her residence in the state of Oaxaca.

Katia Perdigón Castañeda, an anthropologist with Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia (INAH), documented several varieties of Santa Muerte worship, not only at sites she calls *narcoaltares*, but also at private altars within homes, altars for

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advertising dollars, and journalists, who are often seasoned and perceptive Mexico correspondents. These journalists most likely report on Santa Muerte veneration in the cities they are covering because of the violence and cartel activity that is occurring there.

73 . The anonymous *Blog del Narco* documents drug violence to an extent unseen in the mainstream media. Sam Quinones cites “a different kind of slaughter,” including decapitations, dismemberment, torture, and the targeting of police officers (“State of War,” 77).

initiates, portable altars, and altars under the care of *curanderos*.<sup>74</sup> She stresses that *narcoaltares*, for as much attention as they may receive, represent only one type of Santa Muerte worship (80-82).

This section of my study describes Santa Muerte veneration at two locations in the state of Oaxaca. One of the *capillas* is adjacent to the residence of a medical professional who is also its *capellana* and maintains a private altar in her home in a town of approximately 25,000 residents on the Pacific side of the Istmo de Tehuantepec. The other is a *capilla* located on the edge of Oaxaca City. Although both *capillas* are open to the public upon request and one *capilla* was the subject of a 2003 interview with Janet Gómez Sibaja for the local newspaper, *El Sur: Diario independiente del Istmo*, published to coincide with celebration of the Day of the Dead (Gómez Sibaja 6-7), neither *capilla* has been documented in academic literature or in the mainstream popular press.

The altars in both locations came to my attention through information obtained from proprietors of *puestos* selling occult and spiritual items in, respectively, Catemaco, Veracruz, and the *Mercado del Basto* in Oaxaca City. Both *capillas* are well-known enough in their communities that individuals in nearby neighborhoods were able to provide directions to them, although both are unmarked and unadvertised. Both exhibit characteristics of residential *capillas* as described by Perdigón Castañeda. Furthermore, the *capellana* of one, whom I will refer to as La Doctora,<sup>75</sup> is a medical professional who also incorporates Santa Muerte into her healing arts. The history, qualities, and function

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74. Healers; see definitions and discussion below.

75. Because of Institutional Review Board requirements, I have withheld La Doctora's name and address. My interview with La Doctora is cited in the text and List of Works Cited as (La Doctora).

of her *capilla* reinforce Perdigón Castañeda's position that some Santa Muerte adherents practice *curanderismo* (*Santa Muerte* xx) and also suggest a connection between Santa Muerte veneration and the Precolumbian Mexican traditions of *curanderismo*, *magia*, and *nagualismo*. According to Robert T. Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira, "the term *curanderismo* and the term *curandero* come from the Spanish verb *curar*, which means "to heal." Loosely, the word *curandero* could be applied to anyone who claims to have some skill in the healing arts, from a brain surgeon to a grandmother giving medicinal teas" (1). However, in the context of their own work, Trotter and Chavira reserve the word *curandero* for "a person whose main profession and full-time work is as a healer" (1). According to this definition, La Doctora is a *curandera* as well as a Santa Muerte practitioner.

Trotter and Chavira identify six historical influences contributing to Mexican-American *curanderismo*; they also pertain to the Mexican tradition, although perhaps in different proportions. These traditions are "Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, symbols, and rituals; early Arabic medicine and health practices; . . . medieval and later European witchcraft; Native American herbal lore and health practices; modern belief about spiritism and psychic phenomena, and scientific medicine" (25). They stress that the *curandero* is "dealing with powers beyond scientific recognition or evaluation" and with magic. They note that a *curandero*'s magic, unlike that of fantasy or horror genres in literature or film, is "the far more ancient form of supernatural knowledge found in medieval Europe and dating back to Egypt, India, and pre-Christian Europe" (25). They cite James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and its two principles of magic, called the Law of Similarity: "First, that like produces like, or that effect resembles its cause and, second,

that things that have once been in contact with each other continue to act on one another after the physical contact has been severed” (Frazer 11), now called imitative and contagious magic (Trotter and Chavira 67).

### **La Doctora, Santa Muerte, and *Curanderismo***



Fig. 19: The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

La Doctora is a chiropractor, trained in the United States, who maintains two Santa Muerte altars at her residence, which also houses her medical practice. One altar is located within a *capilla* dedicated to Santa Muerte, adjacent to La Doctora’s home (see Fig. 19), in which she displays for veneration a large statue of Santa Muerte in a locked glass case and a variety of smaller statues and other images. She welcomes devotees who come to venerate and dress the Santa Muerte figures and leave offerings, as well as

nonpractitioners who want to visit the *capilla* (Gómez Sibaja 7), emphasizing that “This is your house, for all Latinos and Americans. I invite all Americans who are not afraid of Santa Muerte, who do not see her veneration as a demonic ritual” (La Doctora). La Doctora built her *capilla* for Santa Muerte in 1990, the same year that she began her profession as a chiropractor. Her second altar, dedicated to Santa Muerte Negra,<sup>76</sup> is within her home, and La Doctora explains that she uses it for serious matters related to her medical practice.

La Doctora challenges the common perception that Santa Muerte is associated with crime and violence. She avers, “For me, Santísima Muerte is not evil; Santísima Muerte is good because she has helped me very much personally.” La Doctora is, however, aware that many people do believe that Santa Muerte is evil. In her interviews with both Gómez Sibaja (6) and with me, La Doctora stressed her belief that human beings, rather than Santa Muerte, are evil. She assured Gómez Sibaja that “[Santa Muerte] is not evil; we are more evil ourselves. We are told that we should pardon those who offend us, but the first thing we look for is vengeance. If a person is succeeding economically, we envy him, but we do not envy him when he is in prison” (Gómez Sibaja 7). La Doctora further states that her worship of Santa Muerte does not indicate that she commits acts of terrorism.

La Doctora’s believes that humans, rather than Santa Muerte, are responsible for the evil associated with the folk saint. She characterizes her close relationship with Santa

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76 . The “Black Santa Muerte.”

Muerte as personal and familiar—“*La Santísima Muerte es mi madre*”<sup>77</sup>—and relates conversations with Santa Muerte as though they were discussions with a friend or relative. She describes conversing and negotiating with Santa Muerte as though she were indeed her mother and discusses her images, their stories, and their clothing with familiar affection.

Features of La Doctora’s *capilla* are found in other religious traditions, including Catholicism: *velas* and *veladoras*;<sup>78</sup> *ofrendas*<sup>79</sup> where visitors leave flowers, money, food, and other gifts; and orientation and focus toward the narrow end of a rectangular structure with one prominent figure at the end, in this case, the largest of La Doctora’s Santa Muerte figures made of *papier-mâché* and protected in a glass case (see Fig. 20). The *ofrenda* in front of the figure includes candles, one with the inscription “*Muerte contra mis enemigos*,”<sup>80</sup> red and yellow apples, water in clear glasses, Coca-Cola<sup>®</sup>, an ashtray and matches, cans of Modelo Especial<sup>®</sup> beer, sweets, and flowers (see Fig. 21). It bears little resemblance to *narcoaltares* which, as described by Perdigón Castañeda, include offerings of cocaine and syringes as well as money and liquor, i.e. what a person wants to protect (83).<sup>81</sup>

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77. “Santa Muerte is my mother.”

78. *Velas* are tapers; *veladoras* are fatter candles often placed in glasses, similar to large votive candles.

79. Castro defines *ofrenda*: “Sometimes used interchangeably with ‘altar’, an *ofrenda* means ‘an offering’ and is a component of an altar” (173).

80. “Death unto my enemies.”

81. In his novella, “La Santa Muerte,” Homero Aridjis describes the *ofrenda* to la Santa Muerte as including, in addition to red candles, mescal, and tequila, a glass of black



Fig. 20: *Santa Muerte* statue in a glass case. The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine Whittington.



Fig. 21. *Ofrenda*, *Capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington

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water, a dried tarantula, magic lotions, herbs, and spells, a 9mm pistol, a .38 Super pistol cartridge, a goat's horn, and dolls representing people with their chests cut open (126).

La Doctora's *capilla* reflects the symbolism that is important not only for Santa Muerte practice, but also for other religious traditions worldwide, ranging from the variation of the colors of robes and candles in the Catholic church according to the liturgical year to the colors identified with specific *orishas* in the Yoruba spiritual tradition of West Africa and the Caribbean. Both interior and exterior walls are painted lilac; the interior walls also include white shamrocks painted within pink roundels (see Fig. 27). The three leaves of the shamrocks, La Doctora explained, represent her three children; three is also a number that symbolizes perfection. Her explanation of the use of color again evokes an interpersonal relationship with the saint: "Yes, she likes lilac very much, and also pink. It was significant that she asked for this color when her *capilla* was being built; these colors were used specifically because they are her favorites."

Because of her medical profession and her role as a *curandera*, it is important to note that many aspects of La Doctora's practice are characteristic of the indigenous traditions of *curanderismo*. Precolumbian orthopaedists, *teomiquetzani*, treated sprains, dislocations, and fractures (León-Payán 36). La Doctora explained that the first of her two visions of Santa Muerte took place in late 1980s, after she had come to the United States to study chiropractic medicine. Santa Muerte appeared to her in a dream not as a skeleton, but as young woman with beautiful hair who introduced herself as La Santísima Muerte—La Joven Muerte Encarnada or La Flor Blanc, discussed in Chapter II of the present study.<sup>82</sup> After La Doctora appealed to the saint to assist in her profession, Santa

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82. Although Flores Martos associates this young and beautiful manifestation of Santa Muerte with the *Santería orisha* Yemanyá (295), La Doctora states that she does not include Afro-Caribbean images or symbols in her *capilla*. Although she is aware of the *orishas* and *Santería*-related items such as candles devoted to the "Seven African Powers," she states that her *capilla* has "nothing to do with Africa."

Muerte taught La Doctora how to use her hands and fingers to manipulate her patients' bones (Gómez Sibaja 6). In La Doctora's second vision, Santa Muerte appeared as a skeleton—Santa Muerte Descarnada—and assured her that she, in her role as a reaper of souls, was not yet ready to take La Doctora's life because of the work that remained for her to do among the living. According to La Doctora, Santa Muerte also urged her to love God, because Santa Muerte was second to Him (Gómez Sibaja 6). In addition to the visions described to Gómez Sibaja, La Doctora also described to me Santa Muerte's assistance in helping her to recover from a physical problem, which also explains her initial devotion and the maternal quality Santa Muerte has for her:

For me, La Santísima Muerte is my mother; she is my mother because when I had a problem many years ago, she helped me to survive. I was left disabled at the age of twenty-five and, from that moment, I asked much of her and she helped me to persevere. I am able to walk again, and now I am working as a chiropractor. And from that moment, I have called upon her for the power to straighten the vertebrae of my patients. I have succeeded in doing many things with my hands for patients with ruptured discs that usually only orthopaedic surgery can accomplish. I have succeeded through chiropractic medicine and with the help of Santa Muerte. I invite people who keep Santa Muerte hidden because they fear what people will say. I hope that year after year the worship of la Santísima Muerte becomes greater. (La Doctora)

The manner through which La Doctora learned of her gift is characteristic of traditional *curanderos*. *Curanderos* often realize their gifts through visions, attribute their healing power to folk saints or other divine entities, and display images of these saints

(Babb and LittleDog 117; Scheffler 24, 34). In her book on Jewel Babb, an Anglo healer working along the Mexico-Texas border, Pat LittleDog explains the relationship between visions and the *curandero* tradition:

Usually the gift of curing is revealed through a dream, a vision, a voice, or the development of a deep understanding of the sick, and many times it is associated with a grave illness of the curers themselves or one of their family. . . . However, the full-time healer almost always ascribes healing power to a divine vision or visitation and afterward usually symbolizes and commemorates this visitation with an image of the divine visitant, the picture or statue of a saint, prominently displayed. (Babb and LittleDog 117)



Fig. 22. Santa Muerte statue in a glass case; detail of handbags. The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

Individuals come to La Doctora's *capilla* for two of the same reasons that believers appeal to both authorized and folk saints in the Catholic tradition, as well as other religious practices worldwide: to secure financial gain and ensure success in love. Santa Muerte images intended to secure money for adherents wear gold or gold-trimmed robes. A framed image of Santa Muerte on the wall of La Doctora's *capilla* (see Fig. 23) wears a gold gown to represent wealth; this is reinforced by the peso signs, handbag, golden threads and trim on the mantle, and beads that resemble pearls. A handbag takes the place of a globe or balance. Even Santa Muerte figures devoted to purposes other than financial gain display money-related gifts or clothing. La Doctora's central Santa



Fig. 23. Santa Muerte image. The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

Muerte figure, dressed in a white wedding gown, holds two handbags, receptacles identified with money, which La Doctora purchased for the figure because they are

printed with a skeletal hand and skull and crossbones (Fig. 22).<sup>83</sup> Red is associated with love, passion, and success in romantic relationships; clothing and offerings of red items, such as apples and roses reinforce devotees' requests.

Individuals who suffer from medical problems offer gifts to the Santa Muerte figures at La Doctora's *capilla* to request assistance, sometimes when conventional medical treatments have been unsuccessful. The requests include ritual petitions, which Trotter and Chavira deem essential for *curanderismo* (45). Other examples include figures of infants placed at Santa Muerte's feet, demonstrating the use of imitative magic to counter infertility (see Fig. 24). This figure also bears examples of gifts and regional clothing—red roses and a wedding dress—intended to secure love. As La Doctora explained to me:

The clothing that she is wearing now is from right here in Tehuantepec and is called *nahua de olán*. In [the town of] Nahua, it is bridal clothing for a civil wedding, as is the little crown that she wears. It is a small crown that is used when a woman wants to get married in the church; women only wear the crowns when they become *señoras*. The gifts surrounding the image are offerings that people have left because she performed a miracle for them; they leave these offerings and they also leave money. The figures at her feet are from people who could not have babies and sought scientific methods without success. They asked Santísima Muerte and succeeded; there are the photographs of their babies.<sup>84</sup> All Santísima

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83. Both handbags prominently display “Made in China” tags.

84. Sometimes umbilical cords in small bags are left as *ofrendas* for babies born to couples who have had difficulty having children (Oettinger vii). There are small objects

Muerte can do is help the mother have her baby so that the mother can be immensely happy—Santísima Muerte could never be a mother herself.



Fig. 24. Roses representing love, figures of babies, and a photograph of a newborn placed at the feet of Santa Muerte. The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington.

This narrative echoes the statement of one of Trotter and Chivara’s informants, who said, “When a doctor can’t help me, I go to a [healer]” (50). They also note that the *curandero* offers hope when the abilities of conventional medicine have been exhausted (70).

La Doctora also treats children, at least some of whom do not regard Santa Muerte as a frightening figure. When children or their families come to ask for a miracle regarding an illness, they leave gifts of Frisco®, a fruit drink. A child also left a drawing of Santa Muerte in the *capilla* as an offering (see Fig. 25). In an interview, La Doctora related the experience of healing a child with *curanderismo* which drew upon a magical

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at the base of this statue. It would be interesting to determine whether these bags contain umbilical cords.

healing technique including both contagious and imitative magic, an *ofrenda*, and knowledge of osteology to assist a young boy with a cleft palate, which she calls “*labio leporino*”<sup>85</sup>:

**La Doctora:** This [figure] has a candle, a child’s soft drink, and white clothing, with a white ribbon<sup>86</sup> tying them all together: the candle, the glass of water, the soft drink. I will tell you why. It is because [Santa Muerte] performed a miracle for a boy with a cleft palate. I had him chew Zugas<sup>®87</sup> during his office visit, and after he chewed it enough to soften it, I inserted it into the part of his maxilla that was missing a little piece of bone; I packed it with the Zugas<sup>®</sup>. Then, I removed [the gum] and put it into the same part of La Santísima Muerte’s mouth so that she could perform the miracle of making that part of the bone grow, so that the boy would stop having a cleft lip, because he was also missing the bone in the maxilla [in addition to having a cleft lip]. They were going to operate to put in an insert, but they said that the child could not endure the surgery. I told them to bring him to me and that I would heal him.

**The Author:** And the parents, did the parents know this? And what about the beer?

**La Doctora:** They brought the beer here because the grandfather drinks beer. And one day, he came here a little drunk and said, “Thank you for the miracle that you are doing for my grandson,” and he brought the beer as an *ofrenda* so that the

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85. Harelip.

86 . Trotter and Chavira note the use of ribbons to “tie up negative influences that may harm the *curandero*’s patients” (86).

87. Zugas<sup>®</sup> is a brand of chewing gum.

little bone would keep growing. A great miracle has happened, and because of this, I never remove the candle, the soft drink, or the water. I do not change these because the child's parents brought them here to pay her.

**The Author:** And how is he?

**La Doctora:** The child has already accepted the corrective appliance for his palate; the odontologists say that it is a miracle because the bone in his palate is already growing.<sup>88</sup>



Fig. 25. A drawing by a child left, along with candy, as a gift for Santa Muerte. The *capilla* of *La Doctora*. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington.

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88. A connection between chewing gum and a disorder of the palate was also present in Prehispanic *curanderismo*. Francisco Guerra notes a concern among Aztec midwives regarding the effects of gum on the palate. Midwives warned pregnant women against chewing gum, *tziictli*, because it would harden the child's palate and interfere with the ability to suckle (328).

La Doctora's treatment of a medical condition—a cleft palate—that is usually treated by conventional medicine as opposed to what Trotter and Chavira call a “folk” or “cultural” illness, such as *espanto*<sup>89</sup> or *mal de ojo*,<sup>90</sup> is important in gauging La Doctora's stature as a *curandera* in her community. Trotter and Chavira believe that focusing discussion of *curanderos*' healing power to include only those conditions the medical mainstream considers “non-threatening” folk illnesses rather than exploring the *curandero*'s ability to diagnose a disease, determine its origin, and provide treatment is a “shallow” approach which undermines and trivializes the ability of the *curandero* (8). Graziano notes that “baffled doctors” are common among narratives of folk saints' miracles, which include “a grim medical diagnosis and doctors who regret that nothing can be done,” followed by a visit to a folk saint, then an acknowledgement of the cure by “amazed” doctors (55).

Mexican *curanderismo*, like *oraciones*, is documented in records of the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico. Records of the Mexican tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition constitute a rich source of information regarding witchcraft, magic, and *curanderismo*. Ruth Behar has shown that the Mexican Inquisition did not consider transgressions regarding witchcraft seriously, noting that “in both Spain and Mexico, people accused of witchcraft were treated leniently, as ignorant folk rather than heretics” (36). Behar, however, found a “popular system of belief that ran parallel to the system of belief in the church” with practitioners who were members of the lower caste. Mexican magic

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89. Fright. Ingham proposes that symptoms of depression and anxiety such as insomnia, sadness, and loss of appetite, are sometimes attributed to *susto* and that, in turn, *susto* can be caused by threats, the death of loved ones, or “encounters with ghosts” (74).

90. Evil eye.

practitioners recall Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina* who, like Mexican practitioners of magic and witchcraft, was a *curandera* and a member of the lower caste—Celestina was a prostitute, procurer, and *curandera*—but wielded considerable power in the realm of witchcraft, especially as it relates to love magic (Behar 36)<sup>91</sup>:

If the Inquisition records are any indication, in the interchange of magical cures and remedies that took place in colonial Mexico, the social groups that juridically formed different castes interacted closely, sharing and spreading a complex repository of supernatural knowledge about marital and sexual relationships that the inquisitors simply called 'superstition' and 'witchcraft' (Behar 48).

The love magic of *La Celestina* was not a purely fictional device. María Helena Sánchez Ortega describes primarily female itinerant sorcerers who practiced love magic through incantations and spells, assisting women to find male companions who "would help the women overcome life's difficulties" (61). La Doctora's Santa Muerte *capilla* is frequented by a devotee who appealed to Santa Muerte for assistance in finding love. Like the women described by Sánchez Ortega, La Doctora's visitor wanted support and economic assistance from her man:

**The Author:** And the black and white headdress is very interesting; it is very different from the crown on your large Santa Muerte; that makes these two statues different.

**La Doctora:** This is called an *enredo*.<sup>92</sup> It is tied and placed here on the head with a flower placed on the side as the *Tehuanas*<sup>93</sup> do and which she wears at her

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91. For a discussion of witchcraft, sexuality, and love magic in *La Celestina* see Valbuena.

92. Knot.

wedding as if it were a crown of pearls or flowers. She places a braid that is woven with her hair or with wool yarn and ribbon to attach it to her head and places a flower in on the side. This is the significance of the statue with the red flowers, which is here on the left (see Fig. 26) side and the one on the right side is dressed the same with the color *blanco de Tehuana* (see Fig. 27). The same woman dresses both figures the same way because they are the same size and she offered to dress them both equally. Every year, she brings clothing like this or she embroiders it and puts on a regional embroidered costume because she succeeded in marrying a man who had been helpful to her earlier. He was meant to belong to her because previously she had many failures and wanted a good man, and this is why she comes every year and dresses the figures with clothing of this color. (La Doctora)



Fig. 26 and 27. Santa Muerte with regional attire. La *capilla* de la Doctora. Photograph s © Christine Whittington.

In addition to the evidence of traditions of *curanderismo* and love magic, an incident involving La Doctora's *capilla* also underscores the contemporary presence of another magical element, *nagualismo*, in the Istmo de Tehuantepec. *Nagualismo*, as defined by Lucille N. Kaplan, is "the temporary use of the animal or other form for the purposes of sorcery or harmful intent. The individual assumes the animal form for a few hours or a night, for disguise, or to enable the performance of a magical feat impossible to humans" (363). The first European to document *nagualismo* in Mexico was Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan missionary sent to Mexico in 1529 by the King Charles V of Spain, at the request of Hernán Cortés, to convert the people of the Aztec Empire.<sup>94</sup> Cortés believed that the military conquest of the Aztecs "had to be accompanied by a spiritual conquest" and that the indigenous peoples "must be led to salvation" (Mann 112). Fray Alonso de Molina, who compiled the first Nahuatl-Spanish<sup>95</sup> dictionary, defined *nahualli* as *bruxa* or, in English, "witch" (Furst 215). The definition is still in use today; Jill McKeever Furst notes that the *nahualli* was considered to be one of several entities residing within each human being and defined it as "a human being who could change into animal form," an ability the Aztecs considered negative, sinister, and "most frequently attributed to dangerous shamans who trafficked with the spirit world" (215). Klein et al. note that the word *nagual* is in use today in Mexico, Guatemala, and

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94 Charles Mann explains that "Aztec" is beginning to fall out of favor among historians because the word was not used by members of the three central Mexican nations of the Triple Alliance themselves, but was first used by Alexander von Humboldt, the early nineteenth-century German naturalist and explorer (112).

95. Nahuatl is the language that was spoken by Aztecs at the time of the Conquest (Klein et al. 391).

other areas of Central America “where Aztec influence was felt before the Conquest” and refers to “certain exceptional persons believed capable of transforming into animals for nefarious purposes” (391-392).

La Doctora incorporated a discussion of *nagualismo* into an account of a 1994 incident in which a fire partially destroyed her Santa Muerte figure while leaving the rest of the *capilla* intact. She displays in her *capilla* a photograph of the statue before the fire (see Fig. 28) and the damaged statue itself, with burned spots on its face and the bottom half of the body missing (see Fig. 29). La Doctora relates the story, she explains, follows, “*con un poquito de dolor*”<sup>96</sup>:

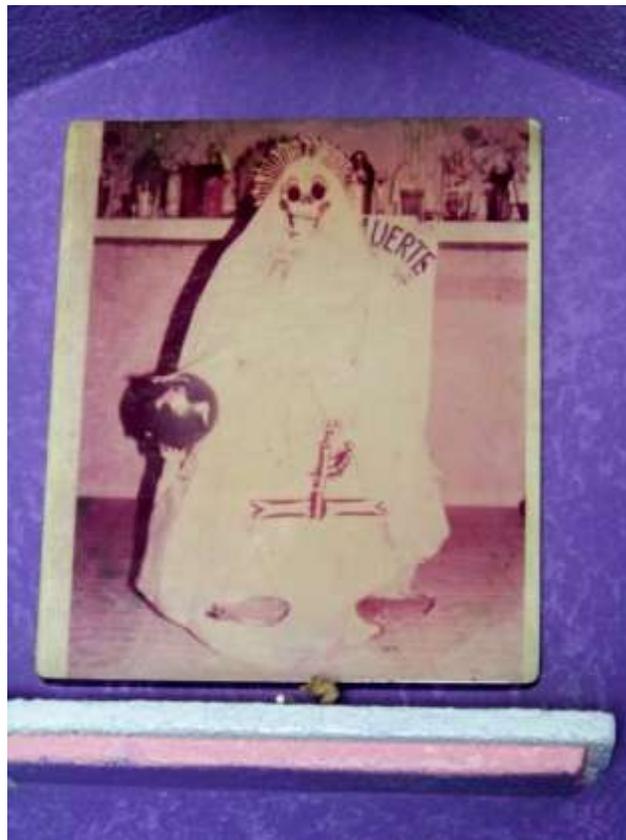


Fig. 28. La Doctora’s original Santa Muerte figure, before it was burned in a fire. The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington.

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96. “With a little sadness.”



Fig. 29. The remains of La Doctora's original Santa Muerte figure, bearing burn marks and missing the bottom half of the body, which was damaged in a fire in her *capilla*. The *capilla* of La Doctora. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington

**La Doctora:** She was the first large one [Santa Muerte figure] that I brought here to the Isthmus. I had her in place the first year, for her first *fiesta*. She was dressed in white and was about meter and a half tall. That first year, we took her outside for a procession. Many people here disapproved of my taking Santa Muerte out because they are devout Catholics. The *fiesta* ended on February third. On the fifth of February, we celebrated her *fiesta* here in the *capilla*, but I did not live here; nothing was here except this *capilla*. We went home, and at dawn the watchman told me that the *capilla* had burned. We came, and the *capilla* had indeed burned; it looked like an old house full of spider webs. [Santa Muerte's] little feet were burned, and also her legs and part of her hips. Of her right hand, only two fingers were left and nothing else. The rest burned. Part of her face was also burned a little. We did not know where the fire came from; all the candles were intact. There was a velvet curtain, and one candle had fallen and burned it completely. However—I don't know why—the rest of [Santa Muerte] did not burn. I rescued her and told her that I would be her bodyguard. I constructed a shoulder

for her that is part of her chest, and made feet for her so that she could sit up as she is now. Because she was the first big [Santa Muerte statue] in place here in [the Istmo], I cried from sadness, from helplessness, from wondering why they had come to do this to her. Then I said to her, “Santísima Muerte, I want to see the person who did this to you.” Even years later, I wanted to know why they did it. Then a person appeared here, from three houses away. This person was a *nagual*.

**The Author:** *Nagual?*

**La Doctora:** Yes, a *nagual*. That is to say, a *nagual* who, in the moonlight, becomes an animal.

**The Author:** It is a person who changes into an animal? What kind of animal?

**La Doctora:** This *señora* turned into a pig. The neighbors saw her enter and saw that she was the one who caught the Santísima on fire. When the *señora* turned to leave, the Santísima herself put the fire out. Then, I asked Santísima Muerte what I wanted to know: Who did this? I wanted to see that person destroyed just like she [Santa Muerte] had been. After a while I was sorry for having asked this because, when she died, she had shrunk so that she was as short as the Santa Muerte that you see here. You can ask the neighbors. The lady died *chiquita*,<sup>97</sup> like [the burned Santa Muerte statue]. The doctors cut off one leg because she supposedly had gangrene; then they cut off the other leg. Then, nothing more remained of her except from her hip to her head. The *señora* was hospitalized, but her children took her out of the hospital because the doctor told them that he

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97. Very small.

could not do anything, that the lady could not live without a feeding tube, but she continued living. She lived another year, until one of her daughters, who ended up dying the year after her mother, came to tell me that her mama wanted to talk with me. I told her that I had nothing to do with her, but she said, “Come! Because my mother does not want to die; she has to tell you something.” So I went. At the time, I had gone to the market for some apples, and when she said “Come!” I picked up my apples and took them to the *señora*. She was in bed, and when she saw me, she began to shed tears. Then, the words that she said to me, the words that the *señora* said to me were: “Forgive me, but I transformed into an animal and went to burn your Santísima Muerte. And I ask your forgiveness because now I am paying for it.”

**The Author:** She was a shaman?

**La Doctora:** Shaman; she transformed.

**Fernando**<sup>98</sup>: But a *chamán* is a *brujo*, a sorcerer. She was a *nagual*.

**La Doctora:** She asked for my forgiveness and I said to her, “Why did you do it?” And she told me that she became very angry because I had built a wall, and the wall affected her because a river discharged there and water flooded her house and soaked all of her things. And her anger at me and at Santísima Muerte festered, so she set her on fire. But she wanted to die because she could not eat. [Her family] was amazed because the *señora* had not been speaking, but at the moment when she asked my forgiveness, she began to speak. And I said to her, “I brought you this fruit because it was for la Santísima Muerte. But you take it; eat

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98. Fernando Kubui, my driver, is emphasizing that a shaman or a *brujo* and a *nagual* are different entities.

it! Eat this apple and you will see the light.” Then she told me, “Yes.” Then they peeled the apple and she took it from my hand, but the *señora* no longer had teeth.

**The Author:** Nothing? No teeth?

**La Doctora:** No way to eat it; she was like a vegetable. She did not have oxygen, but she breathed normally. Then they washed the apple and gave it to her and she began to eat. And when she began to eat it, she said to me, “Now I am going,” and then she said to me, “Thank you.”

**The author:** And she died?

**La Doctora:** I left, and the next day the *señora* died. She was waiting to die until she could ask my forgiveness—for what she did.

**The Author:** And her children? Do they come here?

**La Doctora:** Her children live near me but, no, they have never had anything to do with me, for better or worse. And yes, during Santísima Muerte’s *fiesta*, as my neighbors, they are always here with me. They are perhaps not very devoted to Santa Muerte, but they also don’t interfere with me in either good or bad ways, out of respect for my practice.

And this is the story of the Santísima Muerte who was here fourteen years ago, and this is why she is burned a little on her face. She asked me to restore her, and I said “Very well, because you have taught me to repair bones, why wouldn’t I do the same for you?”

La Doctora’s story about how her chapel came to be burned by a *nagual* reveals several important aspects of her Santa Muerte practice. The first is the intimate, interpersonal connection that both La Doctora and her neighbor have with Santa Muerte,

suggesting that the saint is an entity who can make requests regarding her own restoration and at whom a neighbor can be angry. This relationship corresponds to the characteristic relationships individuals have with folk saints, as described by Graziano:

The more usual relations with a distant, silent God [and even the personal but formal relations with canonized saints] are displaced in folk devotion by an intimate familiarity with saints who are conceived as otherworldly extensions of their communities. The relation between devotee and folk saint is comfortable and interactive: a dialogue, a reciprocal exchange. Innumerable devotees describe their folk saint as a close friend and steadfast companion, as someone who is with them always, and with whom they converse, as many put it, “in the same way I am talking to you.”

One can joke with folk saints, drink with them, enjoy an old-friend familiarity, and address them by nicknames . . . that underscore the relaxed intimacy of the relations. In this perspective, folk saints are hierarchical intermediaries situated between a distant God and informal people for whom faith and familiarity come naturally. (Graziano 5-6)

The neighbor is angry at Santa Muerte’s public procession, not because she feels that Santa Muerte is evil or because she is afraid of danger inherent in *narcotraficantes* or other criminals, but because she is a devout Catholic and thus adamantly opposed to what she would deem devil worship. Further, however, is the harm to her own home which constantly flooded due to the construction of a wall associated with what the neighbor would see as a pagan idol or a demonic figure.

La Doctora possesses *don*, or healing power, bestowed upon her by Santa Muerte, as is suggested by her use of the apple—fruit the Doctora purchased for Santa Muerte—to enable the neighbor who burned the *capilla* to eat—but the saint also complies with La Doctora’s request for vengeance. Although the neighbor suffered the devastation of her home because of La Doctora’s building a wall, La Doctora believes that Santa Muerte complied with her request that the person who caused the fire suffer the same damage as the statue. The candle on La Doctora’s *ofrenda* bearing the text, “*Muerte contra mis enemigos*,” (see Fig. 21) reflects La Doctora’s belief in the cause-and-effect nature of the neighbor’s fatal illness. La Doctora does not indicate whether she believes that Santa Muerte was responsible for the woman’s illness or if the woman, in her *nagual* form, suffered injury in the process of burning the Santa Muerte figure; her injuries are similar to those of shapeshifters throughout Western history who, after returning to human form, retain injuries suffered as an animal.<sup>99</sup> Scheffler notes that *naguals* who transform into animals, including pigs, at night, retain their injuries after returning to human form and that *curanderos* believe that sickness can be a punishment for a person’s sins or transgressions (24; 86-88). In his fieldwork in Sierra de Zongolica, Veracruz, Iván Barrera Lara observed, in addition to the belief that *naguals* transform themselves into animals who suck blood, steal, or perform other mischief at night, that upon transforming into animals, they separate from their legs at the knee. *Naguals* who transform in this way sometimes have pain in their legs or are unable to walk the morning after the transformation.

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99. Petronius’ *Satyricon* offers one of the earliest accounts in which a shapeshifter, in this case a werewolf, retains an injury after returning to human form (50-51).

Another indication that La Doctora cites of Santa Muerte's power is the altar to La Santísima Muerte Negra within her home, which she offered to show me only after our interview had ended. This altar is not part of her publicly accessible *capilla* and is for serious requests, including those involving La Doctora's patients. Santa Muerte Negra, according to Flores Martes, is one of three color associations for Santa Muerte: Santa Muerte Blanca, Santa Muerte Roja, and Santa Muerte Negra. Its altar includes an owl, a frog figurine,<sup>100</sup> a skull with a candle on the head, tobacco, candy, Coca-Cola®, and another candle with the inscription "*Muerte Contra Mis Enemigos.*" The primary Santa Muerte statue, with a black robe and hood, wears many colored beads, a necklace with letters of the alphabet, and a necklace of skulls.<sup>101</sup> On the figure's chest is a packet of magic items, similar to those found on the bottoms of smaller statues. This one appears to contain seeds, beads, and gold items. A framed *Oración de Santa Muerte* is on the right.

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100. In Catemaco, Veracruz, the frog is associated with witchcraft and is the city's mascot.

101. The Aztec goddess Coatlicue wears a necklace of skulls.



Fig. 30. Santa Muerte *Negra*. La Doctora's home. Photograph © Christine Whittington

La Doctora's home also houses her chiropractic practice. The door of her examining room displays a colorful diagram of the spinal column (see Fig. 31), a scientific counterpart to La Doctora's skeletal folk saints, that underscores the importance Santa Muerte has for La Doctora's profession. Similarly, Trotter and Chavira note that urban *curanderos* accept the diagnoses of conventional medicine and "use modern drugs, anatomical charts, and clinical facilities that closely resemble a doctor's office" (39).



Fig. 31. Osteological chart. La Doctora's examining room. Photograph © Christine A. Whittington

*Curanderos*, according to Trotter and Chavira, are sometimes thought to be in league with the devil because of the “mystery surrounding the source of their power. Their healing powers, their magic powers, their source of knowledge, are all believed to be part of a cult or false religion and in direct oppositions to the tenets of various churches” (19). However, most *curanderos*, like La Doctora, consider their powers to be a gift “from God,” thus giving them a mandate to help others (Trotter and Chavira 23). Although La Doctora's Santa Muerte Negra may give the impression of evil because of the association between the color black and negative witchcraft, as in black magic, the matters La Doctora brings to this altar do not necessarily involve harmful requests, but may be more in line with serious matters addressed by professional *curanderos*, as outlined by Trotter and Chavira:

Professional *curanderos* generally concentrate on handling serious physical ailments (diabetes, asthma, terminal cancer) on resolving difficult social problems (marital conflicts), family disruptions, business partnerships); on alleviating psychological disturbances (depression, impotence, conversion hysteria), on changing people's fortunes (luck in love, business or home life), and on removing or guarding against misfortune or illness caused by hexes (*mal puestos*) placed on their patients by a sorcerer (*brujo*) or an evil spirit at the instigation of a rival or enemy. (72)

When Graziano asked informants about rituals involving black candles, he was told that this was done for retaliation for an injury, justice, revenge, or to “restore a disrupted status quo” rather than for personal gain (47).

La Doctora's position as a medical professional, a Santa Muerte practitioner, and a *curandera* is, to my knowledge, unique, although there are certainly practitioners who combine two of these healing methods. For La Doctora, the three roles are seamlessly interrelated. She identifies some conditions that are not treatable with conventional medicine—including infertility, a child's cleft palate, an inability to eat—and, although she does not, in most cases, attribute these conditions to supernatural causes, she perceives the inability of conventional medicine to provide a solution. Trotter and Chavira note that *curanderos* do not believe that conventional medicine has the ability to cure illnesses caused by supernatural forces, and that even commonly accepted diseases, such as diabetes, may have a supernatural, as well as a medical origin (14, 42, 261). La Doctora's version of complementary medicine and spirituality is a unique approach to

healing that also elucidates the possibility—if not the probability—that healing is a component of Santa Muerte veneration.

At the end of our interview, La Doctora offered to take me to a nearby *laguna encantada*,<sup>102</sup> where a malevolent spirit could be seen above the water. Scheffler notes a *laguna encantada* near San Andrés Tuxtla, the site of a meeting between *brujos* and the devil (57). Unfortunately, this experience was not to be. In a development uncharacteristic of the general peace of La Doctora's community, we were told that there were men with guns at the lake who did not like outsiders. The violence prevalent in the rest of Mexico had intruded upon La Doctora's serene *capilla*.

### **A Rosary for Santa Muerte at a *Capilla* in Oaxaca City**

Once back in Oaxaca City, I was able to visit another *capilla* and observe adherents reciting the Santa Muerte rosary, as described by La Doctora. I identified a Santa Muerte *capilla* in Oaxaca City, once again by speaking with proprietors of *puestos* of spiritual and occult items at the markets. Oaxaca City has two major markets: the *Mercado 21 de Noviembre*, on the street of the same name near the *Zócalo*,<sup>103</sup> an area frequented by tourists, and the *Mercado de Abastos*, a much larger market near the main bus station, which is less appealing to tourists and more difficult for them to reach. In both markets, there are sections with *puestos* marketing spiritual and occult items, including those relating to Santa Muerte, in the same way that they include sections of

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102. Enchanted lake.

103. Central plaza of a city.

*puestos* offering material goods such as clothing, shoes, or meats. Two men were working at the *puesto* with Santa Muerte items at the Mercado de Abastos, one younger man with a spiky haircut and an older, professorial man. I visited the *puesto* on two occasions, and both times the younger man told me that it belonged to someone else; they were only working there. The *puesto* sold merchandise similar to that of others I had visited, but it also included a small Santa Muerte altar framed with a red velvet curtain located behind the counter. The *puesto* also included a variety Santa Muerte figures, incense, spells, amulets, and books as well as items relating to other religious traditions,



Fig. 32. *Puesto* at the Mercado de Abastos, Oaxaca City. A statue of the *orisha* Changó is on the left side of the counter. Photograph © Christine Whittington

including a figure of Changó, an *orisha* of Afro-Caribbean *Santería* (see Fig. 32). Behind a locked glass display case were statues of the folk saint Jesús Malverde who, like Santa

Muerte, is frequently connected with *narcotraficantes* and illegal activities.<sup>104</sup> In summarizing Jesús Malverde's appeal to narcotraficantes, Elijah Wald writes, "If there ever was a class of poor people who needed a supernatural guardian, it was the drug traffickers, and Malverde had a natural affinity for those on the dark side of the law" (54). Although *narcotraficantes* are not necessarily "poor people" and some are among Mexico's wealthiest elite, many of those affected by the drug cartels remain in the lowest socioeconomic strata. The younger clerk stressed that Santa Muerte veneration was not his religion, that he had nothing to do with it, and just worked at the *puesto*. On my second visit, however, he gave me the address of a Santa Muerte *capilla* in Oaxaca City.

The Oaxaca Santa Muerte *capilla* was difficult to find. It was not publicized in any way, and the rutted, dirt road on the edge of Oaxaca City (see Fig. 33) was not



Fig. 33. The road to the Oaxaca *capilla*. Photograph © Christine Whittington.

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104 Unlike Santa Muerte, Jesús Malverde is traditionally considered a real person, although stories about him have not been substantiated. One legend is that Malverde was a bandit active in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century who, like Robin Hood, robbed the rich to assist the poor and is considered the patron saint of *narcotraficantes*. Images of Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte often share space in *capillas* and *puestos* offering spiritual merchandise. James S. Griffith (64-89) and Sam Quinones (*True Tales* 225-232) offer excellent surveys of the Malverde legend, devotion, connection to *narcotraficantes*, and *corridos* dedicated to him.

included on a detailed street map. The *puesto* clerk’s description of the *capilla* as a “blue house” was important; it was a tidy and attractive building, the only colorful house—bright blue (see Fig.34 )—in an area of tire and auto repair shops and storage sheds. The house was locked, but a worker at the garage next door knew that a rosary for Santa Muerte would be held at two o’clock that afternoon. He also reported that his aunt was the *capellana* of the *capilla* and that the *puesto* employee who provided the address



Fig. 34. Oaxaca City *capilla*. Photograph © Christine Whittington

was his cousin. The *capilla* was still locked that afternoon, but several individuals were waiting outside and confirmed that the rosary would begin soon. Those waiting were sitting or standing apart from one another and not conversing; each had apparently arrived alone. Their dress and belongings suggested students—the *capilla* is not far from a university campus—and professionals, as opposed to the gang members and *narcotraficantes* that have been identified as Santa Muerte adherents in photographs accompanying magazine articles.

A woman arrived with the key and opened the *capilla*, and the worshippers took places in the pews, again sitting separately from one another. Others began to arrive, alone and in groups of two or three, until approximately ten people were in attendance. Although Santa Muerte veneration does not include a single leader or central religious authority, one woman, seated at the back of the *capilla*, rather than the front, lead the recitation of the rosary.<sup>105</sup> The Santa Muerte rosary can be found in many of the guides to Santa Muerte practice available in market *puestos*, bookshops and, now, through the online vendor, Amazon.<sup>106</sup>



Fig. 35. Oaxaca City *capilla*. Photograph © Christine Whittington

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105. I did not record the recitation of the rosary because I did not have an opportunity to secure permission from all present before it began.

106. An example of the Santa Muerte rosary is included in *Altars, Ofrendas, Oraciones, y Rituales a Santa Muerte* (106). This booklet is, at this writing, available on Amazon, <<http://amzn.com/9689120409>>106.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS

The burgeoning popularity, and accompanying controversy, surrounding La Santa Muerte has not arisen *ex nihilo*. Every element of the folk saint's veneration can be traced, however imprecisely, to possible precedents in ancient Mesoamerica, Europe, and possibly Africa, with most of the imagery and symbolism originating with Mesoamerican deities, Roman Catholic saints and rituals, and the pagan and secular magic—especially love magic—of pre-Enlightenment Europe.

In the introduction to this study, I noted theologian Karen Armstrong's identification of spirituality as humankind's device for controlling threats to survival and for finding meaning in life despite the existence of suffering, death, and chaos. These existential concerns are integral to the creation of religion and are so widespread in twenty-first century Mexico that the major international news media no longer reports every fresh development in the uncovering of each *narcofosa*<sup>107</sup> or each group of decapitated corpses found in a parking lot, residential street, or displayed hanging from a bridge. The pervasive bloodshed in Mexico and among those attempting to emigrate from Mexico to the United States is exacerbated by the societal disequilibrium caused by uncertain faith in those whose responsibilities includes protecting constituents. Municipal, state, and national government authorities, including those in the upper echelons of law enforcement, work in collusion with, rather than against, the *narcocultura* elite. The Catholic Church hierarchy appears to be more concerned with discrediting folk saints and condemning lifestyles and

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107. Mass graves of individuals killed by *narcotraficantes*.

gender roles and preferences than in protecting and comforting the faithful. It is not surprising that individuals threatened by violence and disheartened by the lack of stability, support, and sympathy from traditional protectors grasp and reconstruct the threads of ancient traditions in order to create an entity who will listen and respond to the petitions of the desperate.

As I demonstrated in Chapter II, Santa Muerte's evolution from the ancient world to the present did not leave a linear, definitively traceable trail; instead, a variety of tales, folk-saint predecessors, and elements of indigenous, European, and Mexican religious traditions blend in various ways, sometimes with geographical or social variations, to comprise Santa Muerte as she is currently represented. Santa Muerte's popularity within *narcocultura* arose from Mexico's long tradition of celebrating real, invented, or hybrid bandits and *narcotraficantes* who flout the law and provide a foundation for the identification of Santa Muerte veneration with the increasingly brutal *narcocultura* of contemporary Mexico. Others affected by *narcotraficante* violence, including those threatened by the powerful drug cartels, gangs, crime, illness, poverty, imprisonment, or the involvement of loved ones with these societal ills, turn to Santa Muerte in the same way that other Catholics turn to St. Jude to appeal for assistance with lost causes. They may find themselves experiencing disequilibrium exacerbated by government corruption and disenchantment with the Catholic Church hierarchy and its unwillingness to assist those on the margins of society or touched by crime. Those marginalized as a result of their gender or sexual preference are further distanced from the support of the Catholic Church because the Church hierarchy considers their preference or behavior sinful. Whatever the reason for their desperation, as Malvido writes, "*Los Mexicanos saben cada*

*día cuándo salen de sus casas pero no si regresarán vivos, así que su única aliada puede ser la misma muerte*<sup>108</sup> (26).

The media in the United States, arguably driven by advertising dollars, exploits the shock value of death imagery and the drug trade, upon which the governments of both Mexico and the United States have declared war. Identifying Santa Muerte devotees, altars, and artifacts solely with the drug cartels, gangs, and crime, convinces those unfamiliar with the culture of contemporary Mexico to see perceive devotees as evil and reinforces the opinion, common among legislators, the military, and the United States citizens, that the appearance of Santa Muerte is evidence of the dangers of the presence of Mexican people, especially those who are undocumented immigrants, to law-abiding citizens. In the culture of Greater Mexico, which includes Hispanic communities in cities ranging from Chicago to Tucson, Santa Muerte serves as a source of comfort to Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans at the same time that her presence and connection with *narcocultura* and violence warns Anglos of the dangers of immigration.

While concerns about violence, marginalization, security, and financial success drive Santa Muerte veneration among practitioners, the marketability of religious merchandise and alarming publicity keep Santa Muerte in the public eye. While outside the scope of the present study, the Santa Muerte artifacts and publications could provide yet another way to trace the influence of Santa Muerte throughout Greater Mexico and to follow the money that her veneration is capable of generating.

The Santa Muerte *capillas* of La Doctora and the Oaxaca City *capilla* are in areas of Mexico that are, for now, outside the threat of omnipresent violence and, as such,

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108. Mexicans know every day when they will leave their homes, but they don't know if they will return alive; their only ally, then, is Death herself.

exemplify sites of Santa Muerte veneration not currently in the public eye. Like Santa Muerte *capillas* highlighted in the news, such as those in Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo destroyed by the Mexican government because of their *narcotraficante* connections, they exhibit a blend of Prehispanic, European, Mexican, and contemporary popular cultural traditions. Unlike *narcoaltares*, their ofrenda includes flowers, sweets, soft drinks, tobacco, and beer as opposed to cocaine or weapons. Considering that La Doctora's personal relationship with Santa Muerte began when she was a medical student, encouraged by Santa Muerte to use her ability to heal, she rejects petitions to Santa Muerte that involve harming others. Devotees attending a rosary at the *capilla* on a dirt road at the outskirts of Oaxaca City—so far removed from the public eye that the street is not even on the most detailed map available—bear no resemblance to those photographed in the crime-ridden *barrio* of Tepito or the border cities of Nuevo Laredo or Juarez. While my research involving practices in these two *capillas* cannot be generalized to include Santa Muerte veneration in all relatively peaceful areas of the United States and Mexico, it does point to the error of similar generalizations based on *capillas* in areas with pervasive violence and indicates that further research could uncover revealing regional variations in Santa Muerte practice.

Mexico has a new elite class in addition to the power struggle between poverty and wealth: the upper echelons of *narcocultura*. When public policymakers and members of academic disciplines attempt to define an entire culture by its elite, the results are incomplete and skewed. Defining Santa Muerte veneration by the activities of current components of its elite—*narcocultura*—misses the totality of Santa Muerte veneration. La Doctora and the *capellana* of the Oaxaca City *capilla* are also devotees of La Santa

Muerte, as are the peaceful visitors to their altars who come asking for health, success in business, love, and comfort within a human condition that is increasingly difficult to negotiate in the milieu of Greater Mexico.

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Whittington, Christine. Rev. of *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica*, by Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman. *Library Journal* 115.8 (1990): 86.

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Whittington, C.A. "John Muir." *Read More About It: An Encyclopedia of Information Sources on Historical Figures and Events*. Ann Arbor, MI: Pierian, 1989.

Whittington, C. A. "On the Road: A Guide to Travel Literature." *Reference Books Bulletin* 8 (1988): 755-760.

Whittington, C.A. "Architectural History: A Core Collection." *Reference Services Review* 15.2 (1987): 37-45.

Whittington, C.A., C. J. McKown, M. L. Augustine, A. L. Paster, and R. A. Traweck. *LIAS Training Workbook*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Libraries, 1990.

Whittington, C.A. and Wihbey, F. R. "Revealing the Network: The Federal Depository System in Maine." *Maine Entry* 3.1 (1994): 23-26.

Whittington, Christine A., and Stephen L. Whittington. Rev. of *The American Indian: A Multimedia Encyclopedia*. *American Antiquity*. 59.3 (1994): 574-576.

Whittington, Stephen L. and Christine A. Whittington. Rev. of *Anthropological Literature on Disc. Tozzer Library, Harvard University*. *American Antiquity* 61 (1996): 179-181.

#### **PROFESSIONAL PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS:**

American Library Association. Reference and User Services. Materials Reviewing Committee. Panelist, ALA Annual Conference, June 2004, "Why Reviews? Librarians and Publishers Need Them!" (forthcoming).

Northeast Popular Culture Association conference at Springfield College, Springfield, MA, November 2000. "Documenting Tattooing in Maritime Culture."

Northeast Mesoamerican Conference, University of Maine, Orono, October 1999. "Holy Penetration! Tattooing, Piercing, and Scarification in Ancient Mesoamerica."

Northeast Forensic Anthropology Association Annual Meeting, Orono, Maine, October 1998. "Life Plus Six Months: Tattoos as Identifying Features of Human Remains."

American Library Association Popular Culture in Libraries Discussion Group. ALA Annual Conference 1998. "Documentation of Tattooing."

Northeast Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, February 1998.  
"Tattooing and Tattoo Collectors in Maine: Documentation Through Oral History."

Maine Library Association Government Documents Section Program, MLA Annual Meeting, May 1993. Panel Presentation: "Revealing the Network: The Federal Depository System in Maine."

Maine Academic and Research Libraries Fall Meeting, December 1992.  
"Electronic Discussion Lists."

American Library Association Reference Books Bulletin Editorial Board Program, July 1986. Panel Presentation: "Making a Difference: Librarians and Publishers Discuss the Publishing Process."

### **INVITED LECTURES:**

Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University. "Unsanctioned, Unauthorized, and Unorthodox: Origin and Contemporary Significance of Mexican Folk Saints." 20 November 2008.

Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC. September 2006. "Talking About Tattoos: Memoir, Oral History, and the Marked Body."

Orono Public Library, Orono, November 2001. "Ink, Skin, and Print: Recording and Preserving Information about Tattoos."

John Stevens Academy, Blue Hill, Maine, June 2001. "History of Tattooing." Arts Week presentation at private secondary school.

Beautiful Project, University of Maine, Orono, April 1999. "A Brief History of Women and Tattoo."

### **AWARDS AND HONORS**

Beta Phi Mu, honors society for library and information science. Member, 1984-present.

Graduate Richter Award for research in Mexico, Wake Forest University, 2008.

Eleanor and Claude George Faculty Development Fund Summer Grant (Greensboro College) for curriculum development, 2007.

*Body Marks: Tattooing, Piercing, and Scarification* named VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocacy) Nonfiction Honor Book, 2003.